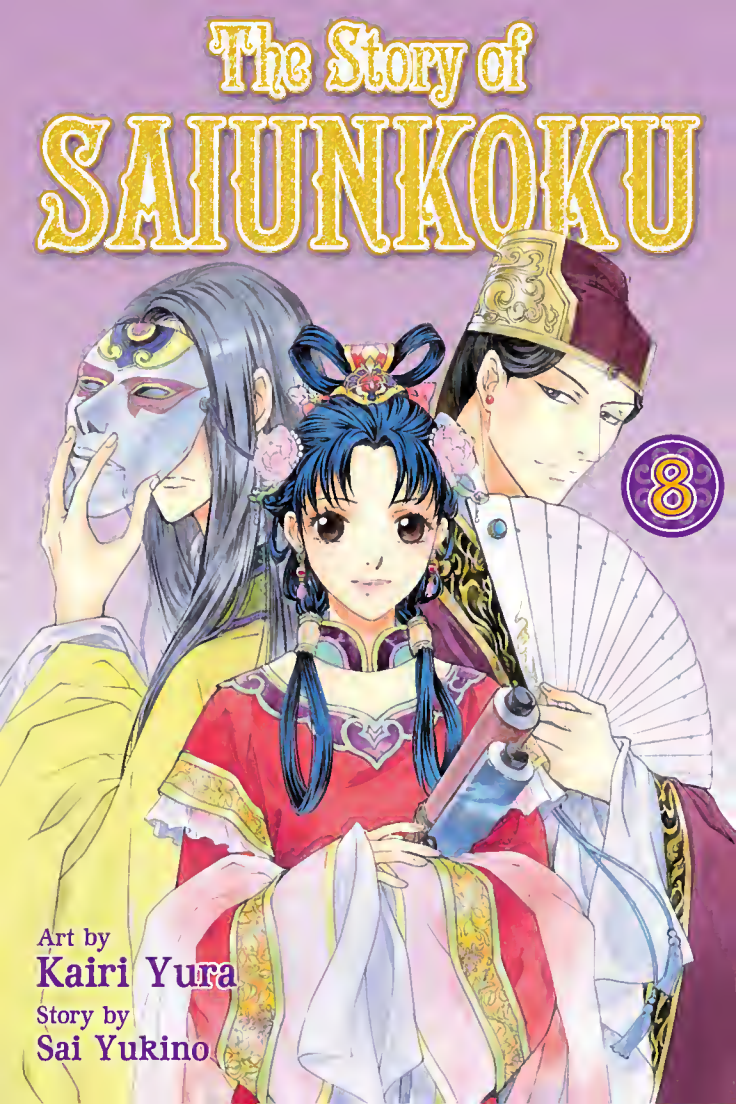
The Story of SAIUNKOKU



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Story by
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The Story of
SAIUNKOKU
8
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Story Thus Far

After passing the Imperial Civil Exam with high marks, Shurei Hong becomes the country of Saiunkoku's first female civil servant... But she finds herself shunned by her colleagues in the all-male imperial court. They continue to single her out for unfair treatment because she is female, and even accuse her of falsifying her Imperial Civil Exam results. Now that her sponsor, Reishin, has been placed under house arrest (albeit voluntarily) for his possible involvement, Shurei prepares for a public inquest in which she will be given the chance to prove herself worthy once and for all! Clinging to this final ray of hope, Shurei begins compiling her notes for the inquest. Unfortunately she and Eigetsu are suddenly trapped and held under guard at Kogaro...

Ryuki Shi
The young emperor of Saiunkoku. He has been pining ceaselessly for Shurei since her departure from the Inner Court.

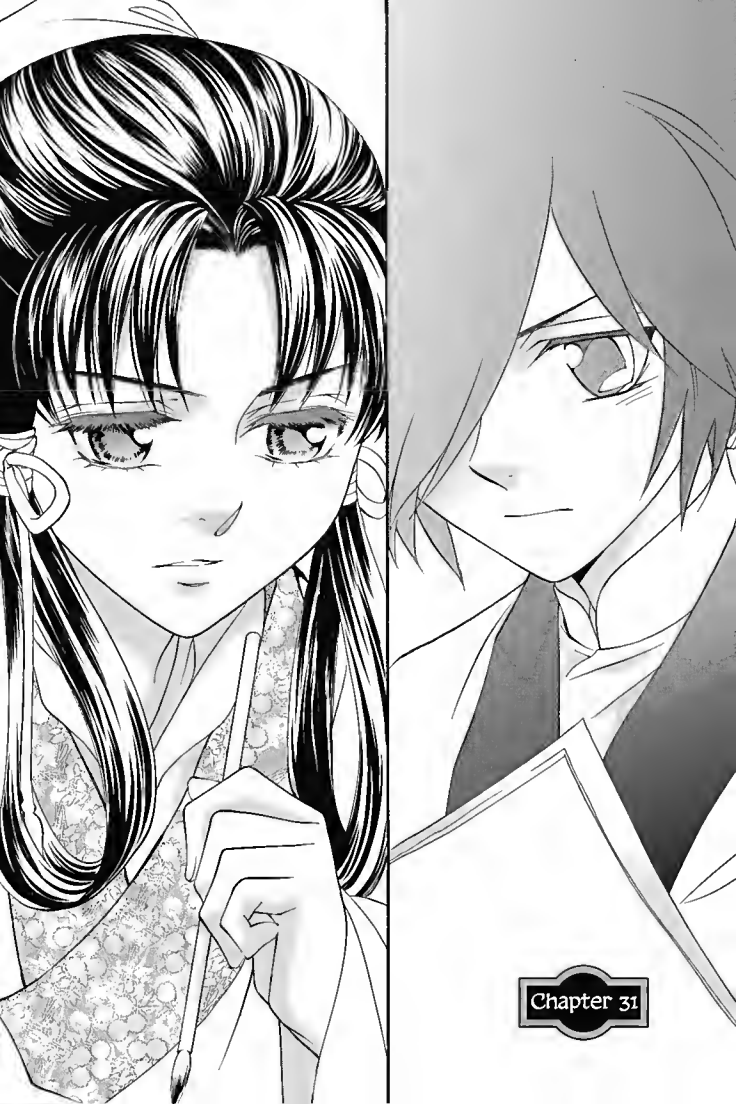
Koyu Ri
A civil servant renowned throughout the court as a genius, currently stuck in a frivolous position (perhaps?) serving Ryuki. He has a hopelessly bad sense of direction.

Shurei Hong
A young noblewoman of the prestigious but impoverished Hong Clan. Having passed the Imperial Civil Exam, she is now the country's first female civil servant.

Shuei Ran
A military officer. He is a general of the Yulin Guard, a squad of soldiers charged with protecting the emperor. He is inseparable from Koyu (much to his friend's ire).

Seiran Shi
After being taken in by Shurei's father, Shoka, Seiran has served the Hong household as its faithful retainer ever since. He is actually Ryuki's older brother.

Eigetsu Toh
At 13 years old, he is the youngest person to pass the Imperial Civil Exam with the top score. He has a quiet, low-key personality.


Chapter 31

PHOO
WE DID IT, MISS SHUREI.
FOMP
AHHH! DONE AT LAST!
THOUGH THE SUN IS ALREADY RISING.
YOUR PART ISN'T OVER YET, MY LADY.
AND YOU TWO, PLEASE GET SOME REST.
THANK YOU VERY MUCH!
PLEASE DO, SEIRAN!
THEN I SHALL DELIVER THIS TO HIS MAJESTY WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE.

TH-THAT'S RIGHT.
MY, MY. YOU'VE FINISHED YOUR REPORT, SHUREI?
YES, JUST NOW.
HAVE YOU ALL JUST FINISHED WORK AS WELL?
WELL, YES, BUT...
HYOOOO

In a grand display of its power, the Hong Clan protested the arrest of Reishin Hong...
...by throwing the entire capital into utter confusion in a matter of hours.
In the Lower City, every shop with ties to the Hong Clan immediately closed its doors.
The long arm of the Hong Clan's influence was felt directly by every person living in the capital.
EVERY MERCHANT EVEN REMOTELY CONNECTED TO THE HONG CLAN IS CLOSED FOR BUSINESS.
THE CITY IS IN AN UPROAR.

OUR BUSINESS WAS QUITE SLOW TONIGHT.
BUT THEN HALF THE CITY HAS DEEP TIES TO THE HONG CLAN.
NATURALLY EVERYTHING IS A MESS IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS.
AFTER ALL, THEY INCURRED THE WRATH OF THE HONG CLAN...
HEE HEE
THE HONG CLAN...
SIP

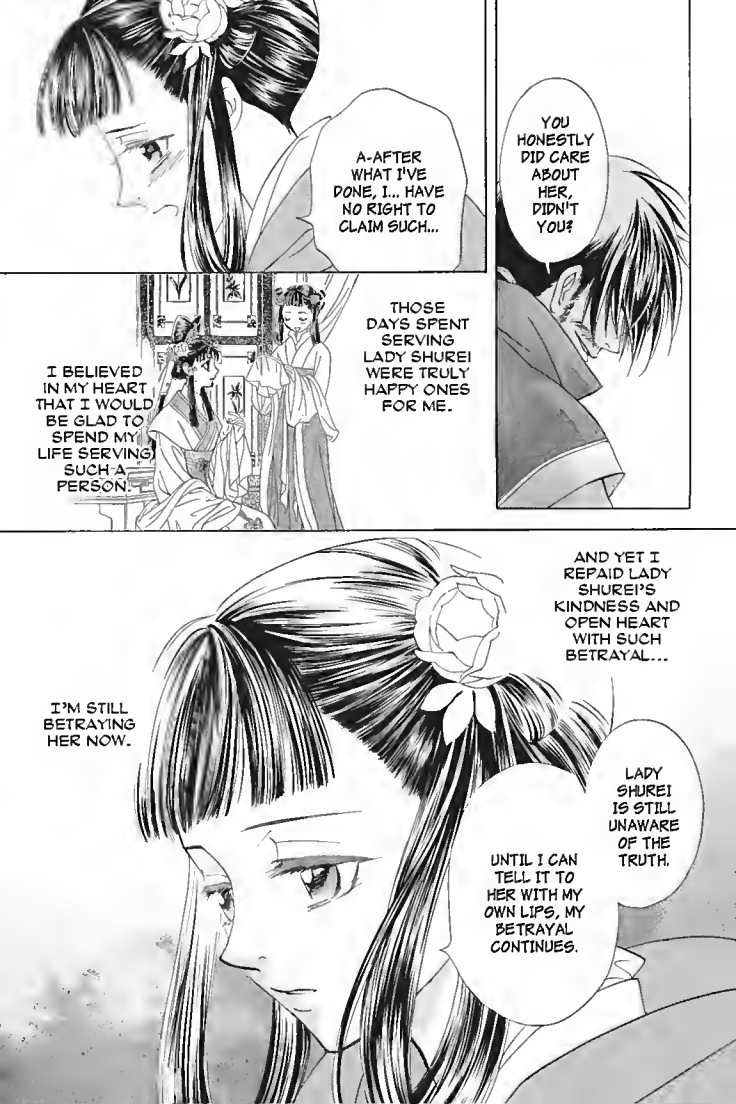
FATHER WAS BORN HEIR TO THE MAIN HONG FAMILY. TO THINK HE WAS MEANT TO HEAD A CLAN THAT WIELDS SUCH FEARSOME POWER...
LEADING SUCH A MIGHTY DYNASTY ...
...AND YET HE COULDN'T SEVER ALL HIS TIES.
THE CLAN FATHER LEFT BEHIND ...
MY MOST PRECIOUS MEMORIES ARE THOSE HAPPY YEARS WHEN FATHER, MOTHER, SEIRAN AND I LIVED TOGETHER, JUST THE FOUR OF US...
THOSE YEARS WILL ALWAYS BE MINE.
...FATHER CERTAINLY WOULD HAVE BEEN OUT OF HIS DEPTH.
SIP
BUT I'M GLAD IT WOULD HAVE BEEN TOO MUCH FOR HIM.
YES... E-EVEN THOUGH THAT CLAN LEFT US DIRT-POOR... I'M GLAD WE WERE TOGETHER...
HEH
HEH
HEH
SHURE!?

...
HUH?
I ENVY YOU.
YOU'RE LUCKY TO HAVE SUCH KIND UNCLES, MISS SHUREI.
UNCLES? MY FATHER HAS YOUNGER BROTHERS?
TO WHOM IS HE REFERRING ...?
I CAN'T THINK OF EVEN ONE.
SIP

HO...!
SPLASH
IS SOME-THING THE MATTER...
...MASTER ENSEI?
HMM...
SEEMS THESE POSTERS HAVE BEEN MAKING THE ROUNDS.
ONE STEP INTO TOWN AND I'D BE CAPTURED LOOKING LIKE I DO.
AH...
FLUP
NO, NO. IT'S JUST...
...I'LL HAVE TO SHAVE OFF MY BEARD BEFORE THE DAY'S OUT.

YOU SURE HAVE SOME METTLE, MISS KORIN.
THIS WAS A HARSH JOURNEY EVEN FOR A MAN.
YOU AREN'T AFRAID TO FACE SOMEONE YOU ONCE TRIED TO KILL?
I MEAN, YOU COULD JUST GO YOUR OWN WAY AND NOT SEE HER AGAIN.
I SIMPLY REMIND MYSELF THAT THE FASTER I PRESS ON...
...THE SOONER I WILL BE ABLE TO SEE LADY SHUREI AGAIN...
AND THEN ...

ONE YEAR AGO, I HAD BUT ONE THOUGHT IN MY MIND. TO BE OF USE TO MY LORD, ENJUN SA...
I AM AFRAID TO FACE HER...
I RESOLVED TO KILL LADY SHUREI FOR HIM WHEN SHE JOINED THE INNER COURT AS HIS MAJESTY'S NOBLE CONSORT.
I MADE ATTEMPT AFTER ATTEMPT ON HER LIFE.
...BUT I WON'T RUN AWAY FROM IT.
I WON'T AVOID IT ANY LONGER.
I MADE A VOW TO MY MISTRESS.
YOU WOULD DO WELL TO FACE THE FUTURE AND WALK ONWARD...
...KORIN.
MORE THAN ANY-THING...
...FOR LADY SHUREI, I...

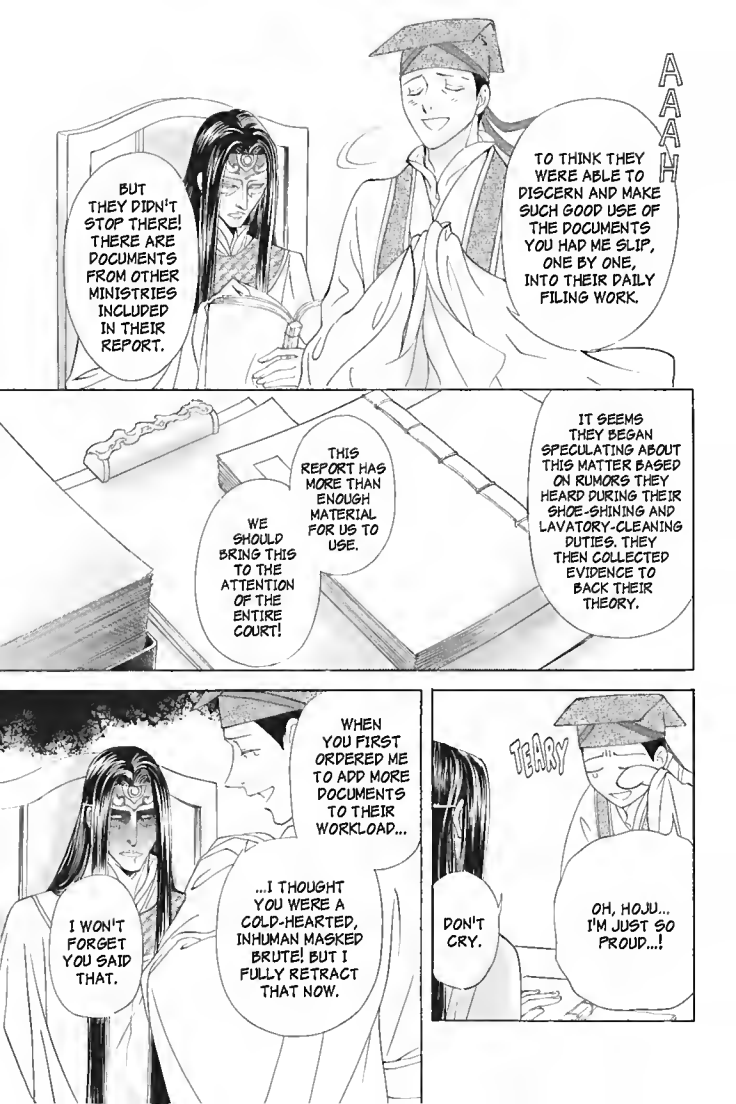

A-AFTER WHAT I'VE DONE, I... HAVE NO RIGHT TO CLAIM SUCH...
YOU HONESTLY DID CARE ABOUT HER, DIDN'T YOU?
I BELIEVED IN MY HEART THAT I WOULD BE GLAD TO SPEND MY LIFE SERVING SUCH A PERSON.
THOSE DAYS SPENT SERVING LADY SHUREI WERE TRULY HAPPY ONES FOR ME.
I'M STILL BETRAYING HER NOW.
AND YET I REPAID LADY SHUREI'S KINDNESS AND OPEN HEART WITH SUCH BETRAYAL...
LADY SHUREI IS STILL UNAWARE OF THE TRUTH.
UNTIL I CAN TELL IT TO HER WITH MY OWN LIPS, MY BETRAYAL CONTINUES.

I INTEND TO SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE REPENTING MY SIN.
SHWAA
THAT IS HOW GREAT MY CRIME WAS.
YOU'RE RIGHT. EVEN IF THE PRINCESS FORGIVES YOU, YOU SHOULD CONTINUE ON THAT PATH.
SHAK
IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER THE OTHER PERSON FORGIVES YOU.
YOU CARRY THE SINS YOU'VE COMMITTED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. THEY NEVER GO AWAY.
THOSE SINS ARE OURS TO KEEP BEARING.
I GET THE FEELING THAT IN YOUR HEART, YOU'VE ALREADY COME TO THAT SAME CONCLUSION.

READY TO SOLDIER ON A LITTLE LONGER?

YES!

L-LOOK AT THIS!
HOJU!!
HO-
HO-
HO-
FLUP
FLUP
THEY FINISHED IT A FORTNIGHT BEFORE IT WAS DUE! THE ESSAY OFFICIAL RO ASSIGNED!
IT'S A JOINT ESSAY BY SHU AND INDUCTEE TOH!
FLUP

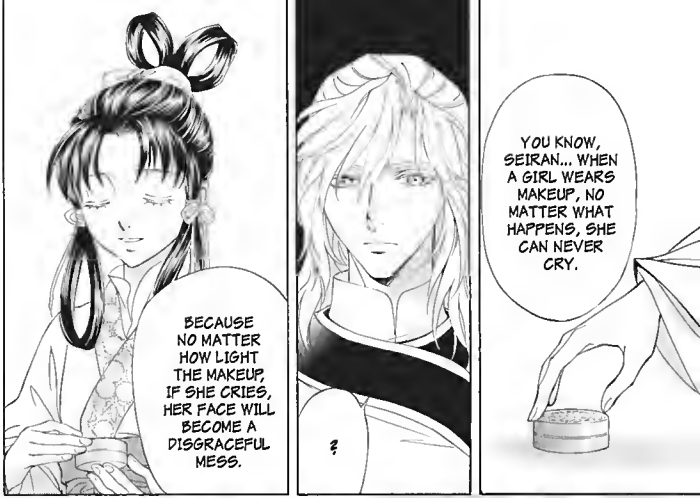

AAAAH
TO THINK THEY WERE ABLE TO DISCERN AND MAKE SUCH GOOD USE OF THE DOCUMENTS YOU HAD ME SLIP, ONE BY ONE, INTO THEIR DAILY FILING WORK.
BUT THEY DIDN'T STOP THERE! THERE ARE DOCUMENTS FROM OTHER MINISTRIES INCLUDED IN THEIR REPORT.
IT SEEMS THEY BEGAN SPECULATING ABOUT THIS MATTER BASED ON RUMORS THEY HEARD DURING THEIR SHOE-SHINING AND LAVATORY-CLEANING DUTIES. THEY THEN COLLECTED EVIDENCE TO BACK THEIR THEORY.
THIS REPORT HAS MORE THAN ENOUGH MATERIAL FOR US TO USE.
WE SHOULD BRING THIS TO THE ATTENTION OF THE ENTIRE COURT!
TEARY
OH, HOJU... I'M JUST SO PROUD...!
DON'T CRY.
WHEN YOU FIRST ORDERED ME TO ADD MORE DOCUMENTS TO THEIR WORKLOAD...
...I THOUGHT YOU WERE A COLD-HEARTED, INHUMAN MASKED BRUTE! BUT I FULLY RETRACT THAT NOW.
I WON'T FORGET YOU SAID THAT.

I WONDER TO WHICH MINISTRY THOSE TWO WILL BE ASSIGNED. THE MINISTRY OF CIVIL AFFAIRS, SURELY.
BUT PLEASE TRY TO GET AT LEAST ONE OF THEM TRANSFERRED TO THE TREASURY!
I WONDER ABOUT THAT.
IN ANY CASE, FINALIZE THE PREPARATIONS. TODAY WE MAKE OUR STAND.
*Ministry of Civil Affairs: One of six ministries that make up the government of Saiunkoku. This one administers personnel.
MY LADY.
MY LADY, WAKE UP.
MMaaa
OH

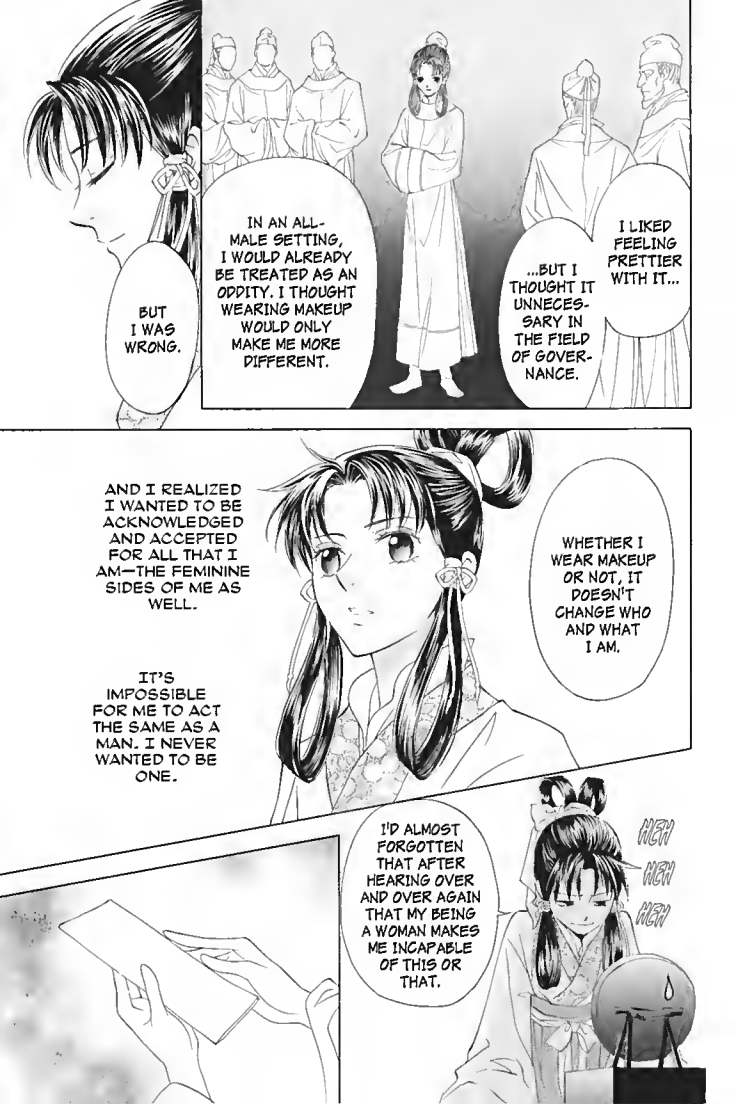
I'LL NEVER MAKE IT IN TIME!!
W-WHAT TIME IS IT?!
GYAAH
WHAT TIME IS IT RIGHT NOW?!
MY LADY.
GRIP
SEIRAN ...
YOU'VE BEEN ASLEEP SINCE YOU FINISHED YOUR REPORT.
ALL THAT IS LEFT IS FOR YOU TO MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE COURT. WE HAVE MORE THAN ENOUGH TIME.
YOU NEEDN'T FEAR. I'VE DELIVERED EVERYTHING SAFELY TO HIS MAJESTY.

It's just like any regular morning here.
Oh.
IS... IS THAT SO?
UM...
HUH?
MISS KOCHO HAS STEPPED OUT ON AN ERRAND AND ASKED ME TO CONVEY HER APOLOGIES FOR NOT SEEING YOU OFF...
SHE WANTED YOU TO HAVE THIS AS WELL.
THIS IS...
I BROUGHT IT FROM THE MANOR AT HER BIDDING.

... KOCHO'S PRESENT TO ME FOR PASSING THE IMPERIAL EXAM...
MAKEUP IS A WOMAN'S BATTLE GEAR, SHUREI.
YOU'RE GOING INTO BATTLE AS A WOMAN, AREN'T YOU?
KLAK
KOCHO ...


BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW LIGHT THE MAKEUP, IF SHE CRIES, HER FACE WILL BECOME A DISGRACEFUL MESS.
?
YOU KNOW, SEIRAN... WHEN A GIRL WEARS MAKEUP, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, SHE CAN NEVER CRY.

BUT I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO WEAR IT AT FIRST...
THAT'S WHY KOCHO TAUGHT ME THAT WHENEVER I'M FACING A SITUATION WHERE I ABSOLUTELY MUST NOT CRY, I SHOULD ALWAYS WEAR MAKEUP.
WITH THIS, SHE CAN HOLD HER HEAD HIGH AND WALK ONWARD.
THIS IS THE ARMOR A WOMAN DONS WHEN SHE KNOWS SHE CANNOT AFFORD TO SURRENDER A SINGLE INCH.


I LIKED FEELING PRETTIER WITH IT...
...BUT I THOUGHT IT UNNECESSARY IN THE FIELD OF GOVERNANCE.
IN AN ALL-MALE SETTING, I WOULD ALREADY BE TREATED AS AN ODDITY. I THOUGHT WEARING MAKEUP WOULD ONLY MAKE ME MORE DIFFERENT.
BUT I WAS WRONG.
WHETHER I WEAR MAKEUP OR NOT, IT DOESN'T CHANGE WHO AND WHAT I AM.
AND I REALIZED I WANTED TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED AND ACCEPTED FOR ALL THAT I AM—THE FEMININE SIDES OF ME AS WELL.
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO ACT THE SAME AS A MAN. I NEVER WANTED TO BE ONE.
I'D ALMOST FORGOTTEN THAT AFTER HEARING OVER AND OVER AGAIN THAT MY BEING A WOMAN MAKES ME INCAPABLE OF THIS OR THAT.
HEH
HEH
HEH

ALWAYS BE PROUD YOU'RE A WOMAN.
NEVER FORGET THAT YOU ARE A WOMAN.
EVEN IF YOU STAND UPON THE SAME STAGE AS MEN, IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO BECOME ONE.
YOU TOLD ME TO COME TO YOU WHENEVER I NEEDED TO CRY.
BUT I WON'T CRY!
PLEASE GIVE ME A LITTLE TIME. WE'LL GO AFTER I PUT ON MY MAKEUP.
SEIRAN.

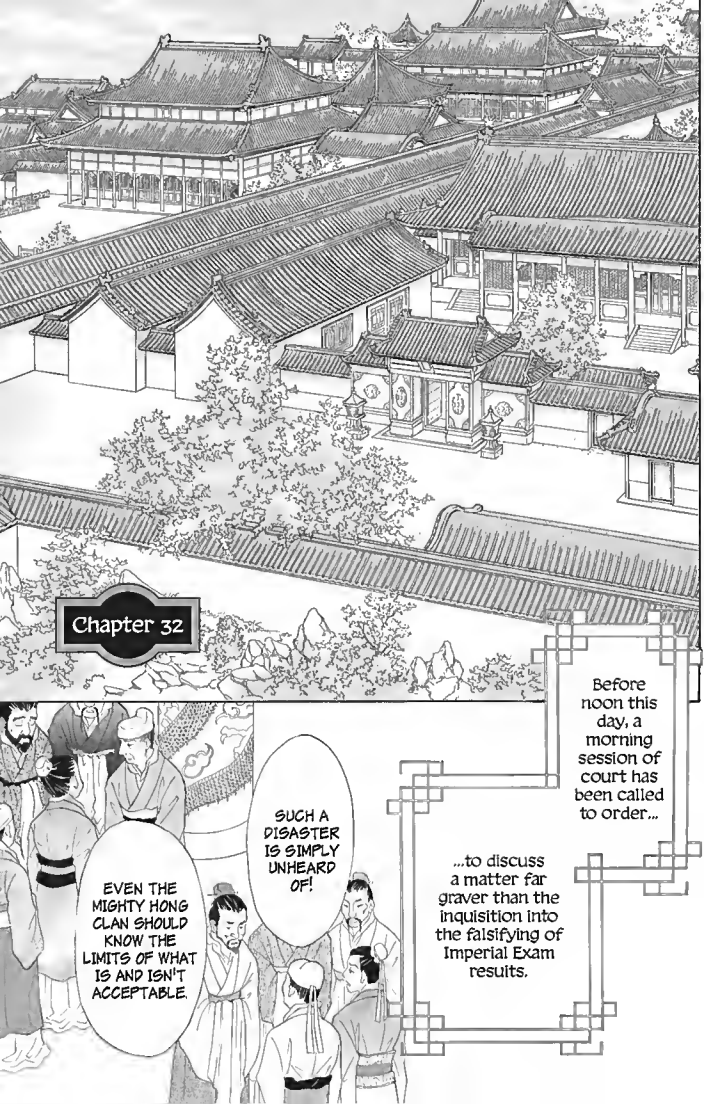
I UNDER-
STAND.
I SHALL ENDEAVOR TO SUPPORT YOU IN SUCH A WAY THAT YOU NEVER HAVE CAUSE TO CRY.
SEIRAN...
HOW IS IT THAT YOU ALWAYS SEEM TO SAY THE EXACT WORDS I WANT TO HEAR MOST?

TIME IS RUNNING SHORT, MY LADY.
YOU MUST HURRY IF WE ARE TO REACH THE COURT IN TIME.
OH, YES.
A PRECIOUS, IRREPLACEABLE FLOWER, RAISED AND GUARDED SO LOVINGLY ...

AN UNTAMED, UNPOLISHED FLOWER, ONLY NOW STARTING TO BLOOM WITH HER OWN POWER...
IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE SHE BLOSSOMS IN HER FULL, GLORIOUS BEAUTY.
UNTIL THAT TIME, I SHALL BE HER SHIELD AND HER SWORD. I WILL CONTINUE TO PROTECT HER...
...BECAUSE A GREAT MANY STORMS WILL SURELY COME HER WAY.
OH
SORRY FOR THE DELAY, SEIRAN—

LET US DEPART, MY LADY.

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU


Chapter 32
Before noon this day, a morning session of court has been called to order...
...to discuss a matter far graver than the inquisition into the falsifying of Imperial Exam results.
SUCH A DISASTER IS SIMPLY UNHEARD OF!
EVEN THE MIGHTY HONG CLAN SHOULD KNOW THE LIMITS OF WHAT IS AND ISN'T ACCEPTABLE.

THEN WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE WE DO?
WHAT FOLLY! YOU WOULD GRANT THE RAN CLAN A CHANCE TO EXPAND ITS POWERS EVEN FURTHER ?!
BUT NONE OF THE OTHER CLANS HAVE THE RESOURCES TO RESOLVE THIS CRISIS!
...
IF THINGS SHOULD GO ON THIS WAY, THE RUNNING OF THE PALACE AND CITY WILL...
WHAT IF WE CALLED ON THE RAN CLAN TO REINSTATE ORDER?
IF YOU HAD STOPPED TO CONSIDER IT, THE CAUSE WOULD HAVE BECOME CLEAR TO YOU IN AN INSTANT.
WE ARE CERTAIN YOU ARE ALL AWARE THAT MINISTER OF CIVIL AFFAIRS HONG WAS FALSELY ACCUSED OF A CRIME YESTERDAY AND ARRESTED WITHOUT EVIDENCE.
WITHOUT OUR KNOWLEDGE, SOMEONE ORDERED SEVERAL LOW-RANKING MEMBERS OF THE 16TH GUARD TO INSTIGATE THE ARREST.
YOUR MAJESTY! WHAT WAS THE CAUSE OF THIS DISASTER?!

...IT IS LITTLE WONDER THAT SUCH A PROUD CLAN WITH SO PROUD A LEADER AS MINISTER HONG WOULD REACT IN SUCH A WAY.
THE HONG CLAN IS REVERED, HELD NEARLY EQUAL IN RANK WITH THE RAN CLAN. THE HEAD OF SUCH A CLAN BEING UNJUSTLY ARRESTED...
BUT CAN WE BE SURPRISED AT THE REACTION?
THE UPROAR IN THE CITY IS THE RESULT.
WE INTERCEDED IMMEDIATELY, OF COURSE. BUT NO MATTER WHAT WE SAID, MINISTER HONG REFUSED TO EMERGE FROM THE PLACE HE HAD BEEN CONFINED.
SILENCE
...
...IS THE HEAD OF THE HONG CLAN?!
MINISTER HONG...

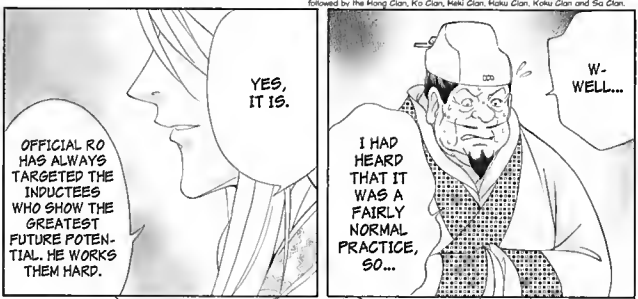
B-BUT...
...TH-THAT CAN'T BE...
Hmm.
IT SEEMS THE MAJORITY OF OUR HIGH OFFICIALS WERE UNAWARE OF THE FACT. HOW UNEXPECTED.
INDEED. BUT IT HAS BEEN ABOUT 14 OR 15 YEARS SINCE HE WAS INSTATED AS HEAD OF THAT CLAN.
YES, I REALLY SHOULD HAVE LEFT THE CAPITAL WITH THE UTMOST HASTE!
BUT FOR SOME REASON, MY ESTATE WAS SURROUNDED BY MOBS OF DANGEROUS-LOOKING MEN THROUGH THE NIGHT, LEAVING ME NO CHOICE BUT TO COME TO COURT THIS MORNING...
COULD IT BE THAT THEY WERE SENT BY THE HONG CLAN?
WHAT DOES MINISTER OF RITES SAI MAKE OF ALL THIS?
HUH?
BDMD
IT APPEARS EVEN A MINISTER SUCH AS YOURSELF DID NOT KNOW OF THIS.
He's certainly sweating up a storm.
A-AHH, YES, I WAS UNAWARE OF THAT.

JOLT
GASP
W-WHAT ARE YOU SAYING, YOUR MAJESTY?
PLMP
I-I'VE DONE NOTHING—
WHO WOULD HAVE MOVED SO FOOLISHLY AGAINST MINISTER HONG HAD HE KNOWN?
OF COURSE YOU WERE.
WE WERE NOT SPEAKING OF YOU IN PARTICULAR, MINISTER.
BUT DO YOU FIND THAT THE SHOE FITS?
NO!
OF COURSE NOT!
AH...!

WELL, THAT... THAT WAS THE STANCE OF THE MAJORITY OF THE COURT, YOUR MAJESTY!
IF ANYONE COULD BE SINGLED OUT AS AN OPPONENT OF THE MEASURE, WHY... WHY, IT SHOULD BE OFFICIAL RO!
THAT REMINDS US... YOU WERE QUITE VEHEMENT IN YOUR OPPOSITION OF WOMEN SERVING AS GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, WERE YOU NOT?
BUT SHE CERTAINLY GETS THE WORST OF IT. IT'S AS IF HE BEARS A GRUDGE AGAINST HER!
PERFECT. I'LL PLACE THIS ON OFFICIAL RO.
IN FACT, HE CONTINUALLY SUBJECTS INDUCTEES HONG AND TOH TO HARSH AND UNFAIR TREATMENT!
FURTHER, HE IS SURPRISINGLY ONE OF THE EXTREMELY FEW WHOM MINISTER HONG FAVORS.
OFFICIAL RO MADE NO PARTICULAR PROTEST TO ADMITTING WOMEN INTO THE CIVIL SERVICE.
GRIN
SURELY IT STEMS FROM SOME MANNER OF RESENTMENT HE FEELS TOWARD HER SPONSOR, MINISTER HONG.
OFFICIAL RO'S RANK IS TOO LOW TO ALLOW HIM TO ATTEND COURT! HE'LL HAVE NO CHANCE TO REFUTE MY ACCUSATIONS ...!

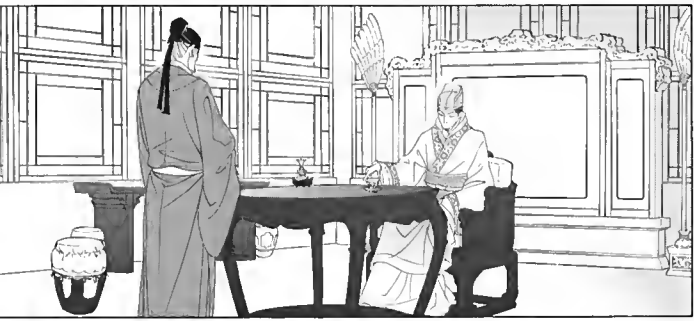
WE HAVE HEARD THAT THE ONLY ONE WHO SPOKE UP WAS INDUCTEE HEKI, AN ARISTOCRAT OF THE SEVEN NOBLE CLANS.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, YOU SAY A SUBORDINATE OF YOURS IS TREATING SOME INDUCTEES UNFAIRLY, YET YOU HAVE DONE NOTHING TO REMEDY THE SITUATION?
WHAT ...?

*Seven Noble Clans: The most powerful families in Saunkoku. The highest ranking is the Ran Clan, followed by the Hong Clan, Ko Clan, Heki Clan, Haku Clan, Koku Clan and Sa Clan.


OFFICIAL RO HAS ALWAYS TARGETED THE INDUCTEES WHO SHOW THE GREATEST FUTURE POTENTIAL. HE WORKS THEM HARD.
YES, IT IS.
I HAD HEARD THAT IT WAS A FAIRLY NORMAL PRACTICE, SO...
W-WELL...

REISHIN HONG IS THE MINISTER OF CIVIL AFFAIRS.
KIJIN KO IS THE MINISTER OF THE TREASURY.
KOYU RI AND SHUEI RAN ARE TOP-RANKING OFFICIALS DESPITE THEIR YOUTH...
...AND SERVE AT THE IMMEDIATE SIDE OF THEIR EMPEROR.
HOJU...

COME TO US SOON, REISHIN...



YOU CERTAINLY GAVE MY PRIDE A HEALTHY BRUISING.
EVEN KNOWING WHO I WAS, YOU NEVER LET UP ON ME AT ALL, DID YOU?

SIGH
I KNEW IT COULD TAKE A BRUISING WITHOUT BREAKING.
MINISTER HONG, HOW LONG DO YOU INTEND TO STAY IN HERE?
UNTIL MY IRE IS APPEASED.
NOW DO SIT DOWN AND JOIN ME FOR A CUP OF TEA.
NEVER MIND THE TEA! YOU MUST GO AT ONCE TO THE COURT.
I WAS TOLD THAT YOU WOULD GO ONLY IF I CAME WITH YOU, AND SO I AM HERE.
HOW FARES THE CITY AT THE MOMENT? AND THE PALACE?
HOW DO YOU THINK THEY ARE FARING, MINISTER?
SLUMP
YOU KNOW I HAVE NO CONCERN FOR EITHER OUR COUNTRY OR THE EMPEROR.
IN FACT, I RATHER THINK IT WOULD DO THAT SNOT-NOSED BRAT ON THE THRONE A WORLD OF GOOD TO EXPERIENCE A LITTLE HARDSHIP.
YOU OUGHTN'T BE THE ONE TO SAY THAT.

To the present day, Reishin Hong has famously never uttered the words, "I was wrong," "I'm sorry" or "I regret" in all his life.
IT WOULD DO YOU A WORLD OF GOOD TO EXPERIENCE A LITTLE CONCERN.
ESPE-CIALLY RIGHT NOW!
AS I SAID, I SHALL GO TO THE COURT IF YOU WILL ACCOMPANY ME.
IN ANY CASE, I DO NOT LIE IN REGARDS TO TRIVIAL MATTERS.
BEFORE WE GO, LET US ENJOY A CUP OF TEA.
I WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU ABOUT THE PAST.
THEN LET US GO DIRECT-LY!
FWUP
...
PLEASE, SIT. AS STUBBORNLY SERIOUS AS YOU ARE, IT IS A RARE CHANCE INDEED TO BE ABLE TO SIT AND SPEAK WITH YOU LIKE THIS.

THOUGH I'LL ADMIT I IMAGINED QUITE A FEW COLORFUL WAYS TO KILL YOU BACK WHEN YOU MADE ME CLEAN OUT THE STABLES AS AN INDUCTEE.
I HAVEN'T POISONED IT, SO PLEASE DRINK WITHOUT FEAR.
INDEED. I RECALL THE MURDEROUS RAGE EMANATING FROM YOU ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS.
SIP
I AM GLAD I NEVER ACTED ON IT.
ONLY LATER DID I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR TRUE INTENTIONS WERE.
YES... IT WAS AFTER I RECEIVED MY APPOINTMENT AS A CIVIL SERVANT ...

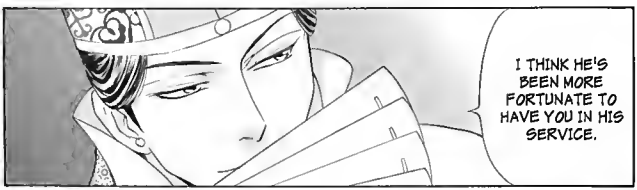
AND THOSE WITHOUT SPONSORS ARE EASILY TAKEN IN BY THE VARIOUS FACTIONS AT COURT AND MADE INTO HAPLESS LACKEYS.
THEY ARE BACKED BY POWERFUL NOBLES, AND THE BORROWED PRESTIGE THEY RECEIVE TURNS THEIR HEADS. THEY QUICKLY BECOME CORRUPT.
THOSE WHO ARE YOUNG AND VERY TALENTED CAN EASILY BE DEVOURED BY THE COURT.
THAT WAS WHY YOU ALWAYS TREATED US SO HARSHLY AND PUSHED US TO SUCH UNREASONABLE EXTREMES.
YOU ALSO DID IT TO GIVE THOSE WITH PROMISE THE CHANCE TO SHOW THE COURT THE EXTENT OF THEIR ABILITIES.
YOUR STRINGENT TRAINING WAS MEANT TO MAKE US BELIEVE IN OUR OWN ABILITIES, SO WE COULD RESIST THE PRESSURES OF THE COURT.
*Tai Yushun Tai, the current interim governor of Sō Province. He passed his exam the same year as Reishin.
CLEANING LAVATORIES, SHINING SHOES...
WASHING DISHES, CLEANING THE STABLES...
THOUGH IT APPEARED YOU SELECTED PARTICULARLY HUMILIATING JOBS FOR US, THEY WERE ACTUALLY PRIME PLACES FOR US TO OBSERVE AND LEARN.
BECAUSE THEY WERE PLACES PEOPLE TENDED TO DROP THEIR GUARDS.
YOU TREATED KIJIN, TEI AND ME THAT WAY.
AS YOU LATER DID TO KOYU AND SHUEI RAN.

I DOUBT A NORMAL INDUCTEE WOULD MAKE QUITE AS MUCH USE OF IT AS YOU HAVE.
I OWE YOU A GREAT DEAL FOR HAVING ME CLEAN THE STABLES BACK THEN. I LEARNED THE WEAKNESSES OF MANY OF OUR COLLEAGUES AS A RESULT. THAT INFORMATION CONTINUES TO SERVE ME TO THIS DAY.
HEH HEH HEH
EIGETSU TOH... FAR TOO YOUNG TO HAVE PASSED AS JOGEN, AND WITHOUT A SINGLE SPONSOR TO PROTECT HIM...
AND SHUREI, A YOUNG WOMAN...
YOU SAW IMMEDIATELY THAT THEY WOULD BE RESENTED AND BULLIED...
YOU QUICKLY WASHED YOUR HANDS OF THE INDUCTEES WHO LACKED THE ABILITY TO KEEP UP AND THOSE WHO TRIED TO BRIBE YOUR FAVOR. YOU DIMINISHED THEIR WORKLOADS AS YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF THEM FELL.
SINCE YOU KNOW PRECISELY HOW MUCH WORK THE HIGHEST OFFICIALS OF THE COURT ARE EXPECTED TO DO, YOU WERE ABLE TO JUDGE WHETHER EACH INDUCTEE HAD THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME GREAT OR NOT.
EVEN THOSE WHO HAD BEEN PREJUDICED AGAINST THEM WERE FORCED TO ACKNOWL-EDGE THEIR ABILITIES.
THAT WAS WHY YOU PERSECUTED THEM SO PUBLICALLY. AT THE SAME TIME, IT GAVE PEOPLE A CHANCE TO SEE HOW THE TWO OF THEM PERSEVERED THROUGHOUT YOUR HARSH TREATMENT.

IF YOU HAD EVER SAID A SINGLE WORD TO EITHER KIJIN OR MYSELF, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN PROMOTED FAR ABOVE THIS STATION IN AN INSTANT.
SWAP
I DO NOT.
YOU OVER-ESTIMATE ME.
AND THE PRESENT EMPEROR HAS CONVEYED TO ME THE TRUST HE PLACES IN THE WORK I DO.
"FOR SUCH A ONE AS YOU IS NECESSARY IN THIS COURT," THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR ONCE SAID TO ME AND HONORED ME WITH A NOD OF HIS HEAD.
I AM PERFECTLY SATISFIED IN MY CURRENT POSITION.
...AND SEEING THE YOUNG ONES I ONCE TRAINED GO ON TO ACHIEVE PROMINENCE LIKE YOURSELF IS MY GREATEST PRIDE.
TO KNOW I HAVE THE FULL CONFIDENCE OF THE EMPEROR BRINGS ME IMMENSE JOY...

HIS MAJESTY IS MOST FORTUNATE TO GAIN SUCH SERVANTS AT THE VERY START OF HIS REIGN.
WITH THE MANY YEARS AHEAD THAT THEY WILL SERVE OUR COUNTRY, THE PRESENT EMPEROR'S REIGN IS SURE TO BE ONE OF GREAT PROSPERITY.

I HAVE SEEN THE WAY THIS BATCH OF YOUNG INDUCTEES SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER TO PULL EVERYONE UPWARDS.
THIS YEAR BRINGS GREAT HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.


I THINK HE'S BEEN MORE FORTUNATE TO HAVE YOU IN HIS SERVICE.

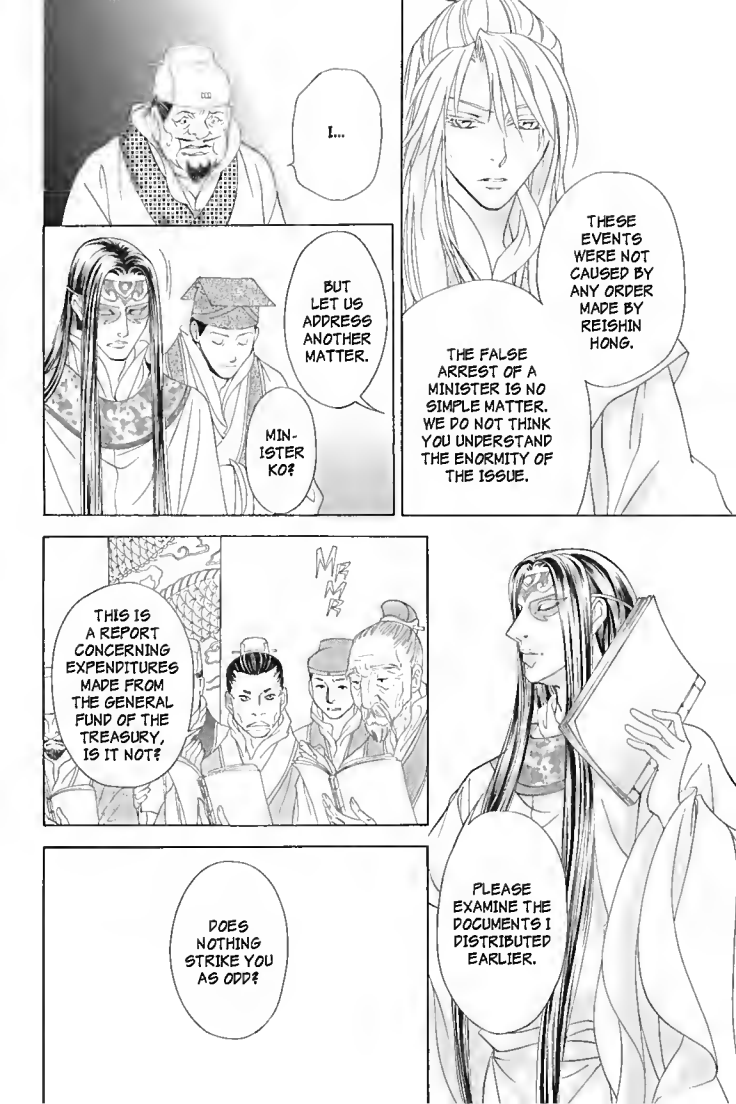
HONESTLY! WHAT AWFUL STEAMED BUNS!
CHOMP
CHOMP
THOUGH I STILL ATE THEM.
YES, THOSE ENRAGED YOU TOO.

WHICH REMINDS ME... WHAT A SHOCK IT WAS WHEN I LEARNED THAT THE ONE LEAVING THOSE SNACKS AND TEA FOR US EVERY EVENING WAS YOU, OFFICIAL RO.
THROUGH EVERYTHING, YOU'VE NEVER UTTERED A WORD OF COMPLAINT. IN MY VIEW, YOURS HAS BEEN AN UNJUSTLY HUMBLE LIFE.
PLEASE DON'T CONCERN YOURSELF.

HIS MAJESTY ALSO WISHES TO REWARD YOU FOR YOUR LONG YEARS OF SERVICE.
I...
SO I ASK YOU, WON'T YOU ACCOMPANY ME AT COURT FROM THIS DAY ONWARD?
I-I AM MORE THAN SATISFIED IN MY CURRENT POST—
YOU... YOU INTEND TO COERCE ME?
COERCE YOU? I AM SIMPLY ACTING IN MY CAPACITY AS HEAD OF CIVIL AFFAIRS TO ASSIGN SUPERIOR MINDS TO WORK THAT MAKES THE BEST USE OF THEM.
AND IF THE ENTIRE CITY SHOULD GROUND TO A HALT, YOUR KIND HEART WILL SURELY FEEL FOR THE COMMONERS WHOSE LIVES WILL BEAR THE RESULT.
IF YOU WON'T GO, THEN I WON'T EITHER.

...
I...DO NOT BELIEVE THE TRAINING OF INDUCTEES IS TRIVIAL IN THE LEAST.
IN ANY CASE, WE HAVE SO FEW TRULY TALENTED OFFICIALS AT COURT THAT I CAN'T AFFORD TO LET ONE LANGUISH IN SUCH A TRIVIAL POSITION.
DO YOU DISLIKE THE IDEA THAT MUCH?
I'LL COME WITH YOU TO COURT.
YES, IT'S PERFECT! YOU SIMPLY MUST—
WELL, IT IS TRUE THAT YOUR SERVICE IS WASTED ON HIS MAJESTY.
AH, I HAVE IT! WHY NOT COME SERVE MY CLAN INSTEAD? WE COULD MAKE YOU OUR MAJORDOMO!
FWAP

THEN, AS PROMISED...
...LET US BE ON OUR WAY.
I HAVE TRULY DONE NOTHING!
Y-YOUR MAJESTY ...!
ISN'T IT FAR MORE PRESSING TO ADDRESS THE CRIMES OF MINISTER HONG, WHO—WHATEVER HIS EXCUSE—HAS GREATLY HINDERED COMMERCE IN OUR CITY?


I...
BUT LET US ADDRESS ANOTHER MATTER.
MIN-ISTER KO?
THESE EVENTS WERE NOT CAUSED BY ANY ORDER MADE BY REISHIN HONG.
THE FALSE ARREST OF A MINISTER IS NO SIMPLE MATTER. WE DO NOT THINK YOU UNDERSTAND THE ENORMITY OF THE ISSUE.
MENU
THIS IS A REPORT CONCERNING EXPENDITURES MADE FROM THE GENERAL FUND OF THE TREASURY, IS IT NOT?
PLEASE EXAMINE THE DOCUMENTS I DISTRIBUTED EARLIER.
DOES NOTHING STRIKE YOU AS ODD?

SMIRK
O HO!
LOOKS AS IF THERE'S QUITE A LOT OF NEEDLESS SPENDING COMING FROM THE MINISTRY OF RITES.
MR MR
MR MR
MR MR
PRECI-SELY.
A FEW YEARS AGO, THE MINISTRY OF RITES REQUESTED A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE TO THEIR EXPENSE BUDGET.
BUT I CAN SEE NO REASON FOR THE SUDDEN RISE IN THEIR EXPENDI-TURES.
FURTHER, UPON HIS MAJESTY'S CORONATION, WE CONDUCTED A FULL REVIEW OF THE COURT'S FINANCES ...
...AND THIS SURFACED DURING THAT REVIEW.
THE MINISTRY OF RITES HAD A LARGE NUMBER OF EXPENDITURES THAT WERE HIGHLY QUESTION-ABLE IN NATURE.
FLIP

THE MINISTRY OF RITES IS IN THE PRACTICE OF DISPATCHING COURIERS TO CARRY NEWS OF THE RESULTS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE PASSED THE IMPERIAL EXAM TO THEIR HOMETOWNS.
IT APPEARS THAT EIGETSU TOH, WHO PASSED AS JOGEN THIS YEAR, MADE USE OF THE COURIER'S SERVICES TO SEND THE FULL 80 SILVER RYO OF HIS PRIZE PURSE BACK TO HIS VILLAGE.
HOWEVER, NOT ONE SINGLE RYO MADE IT TO ITS DESTINATION.
CARE TO EXPLAIN THAT...
... MINISTER SAI?
...THE COURIER EITHER LOST IT OR STOLE IT ON THE WAY, I SUPPOSE.
AS A MATTER OF FACT, THE MINISTRY OF THE TREASURY HAS RECEIVED SEVERAL IDENTICAL REQUESTS FOR REMUNERATION THESE PAST FEW YEARS ...
ALL OF THEM RELATING TO SUMS OF MONEY LOST WHILE BEING TRANSPORTED BY COURIERS OF THE MINISTRY OF RITES.
OH? WHAT AN INTERESTING SUGGESTION.

MINISTER SAI, THESE INCIDENTS BEGAN JUST AROUND THE TIME YOU WERE MADE HEAD OF THAT MINISTRY.
THIS YEAR, WITH THE AID OF GENERAL RAN, I HAD THE COURIER DISPATCHED BY THE MINISTRY OF RITES FOLLOWED.
AND WHERE SHOULD HE GO, PRIZE PURSE IN HAND, BUT DIRECTLY TO THE GATES OF A CERTAIN MANSION...?
I'M BEING SET UP!!
I HAVEN'T YET SAID WHOSE MANSION IT WAS.
...!
WHY DO YOU WEAR THAT MASK?
THEN ALLOW ME TO SAY SOMETHING, MINISTER KO!

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT SOME UNKNOWN OUTSIDER HASN'T INFILTRATED THE COURT IMPERSONATING MINISTER KO?!
WHY SHOULD A MAN WHO HIDES HIS FACE FROM THE COURT BE ALLOWED TO SERVE AS ONE OF ITS HIGHEST MINISTERS?!
IF YOU TRULY HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE, I DEMAND YOU REMOVE THAT MASK AND SHOW THE COURT YOUR TRUE FACE RIGHT NOW!!

CHOMP
CHOMP

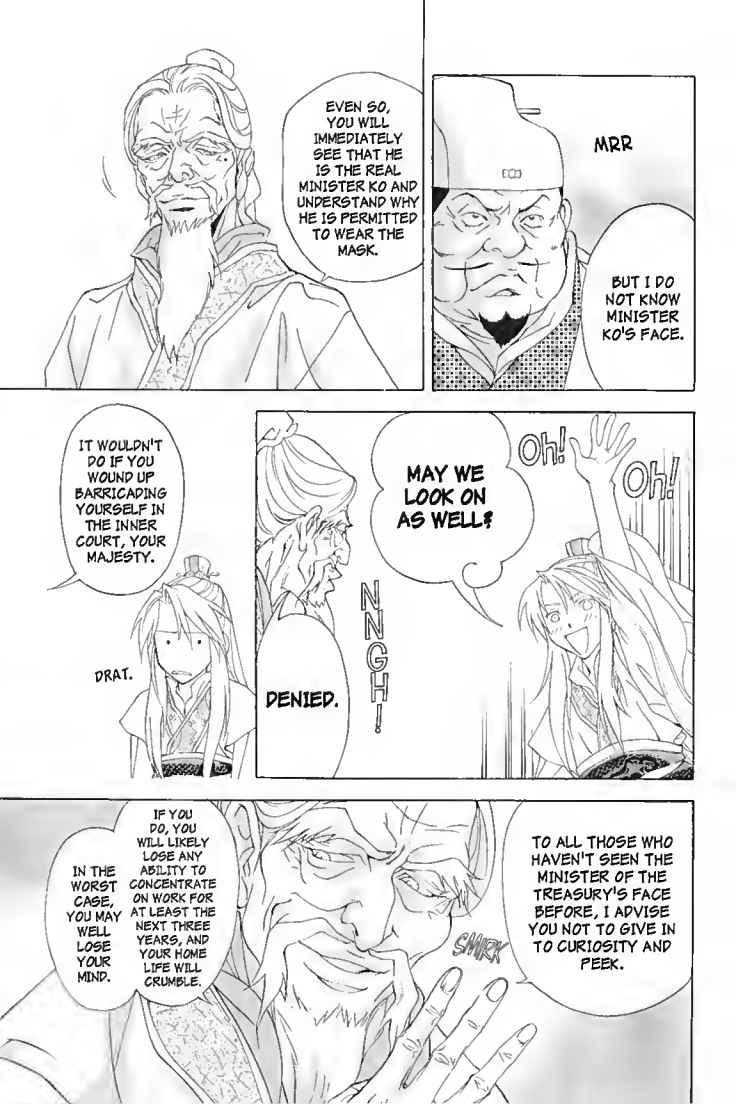
The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

Chapter 33

YES... SURELY YOU'VE KILLED THE REAL MINISTER KO AND ARE NOW MASQUERADING AS HIM.
CALLING HIMSELF BY SOME RIDICULOUS NAME LIKE "KIJIN" AND GOING ABOUT WITH HIS HAIR UNBOUND...! I'LL UNNERVE HIM BY UNMASKING HIM IN FRONT OF THE ENTIRE COURT!!
THERE ARE MANY RUMORS OF HOW HORRIFICALLY UGLY HE IS. THIS SHALL SHAME HIM INTO SILENCE!
DO IT AT ONCE! REMOVE YOUR MASK AND SHOW US YOUR FACE!
LIKE SOME PLOT TWIST FROM A LURID NOVEL...
SHLP
H-HOJU...!
FINE. I HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE.
SINCE YOU INSIST, I SHALL REMOVE MY MASK.
GWAH
MRMR
?
?
OH

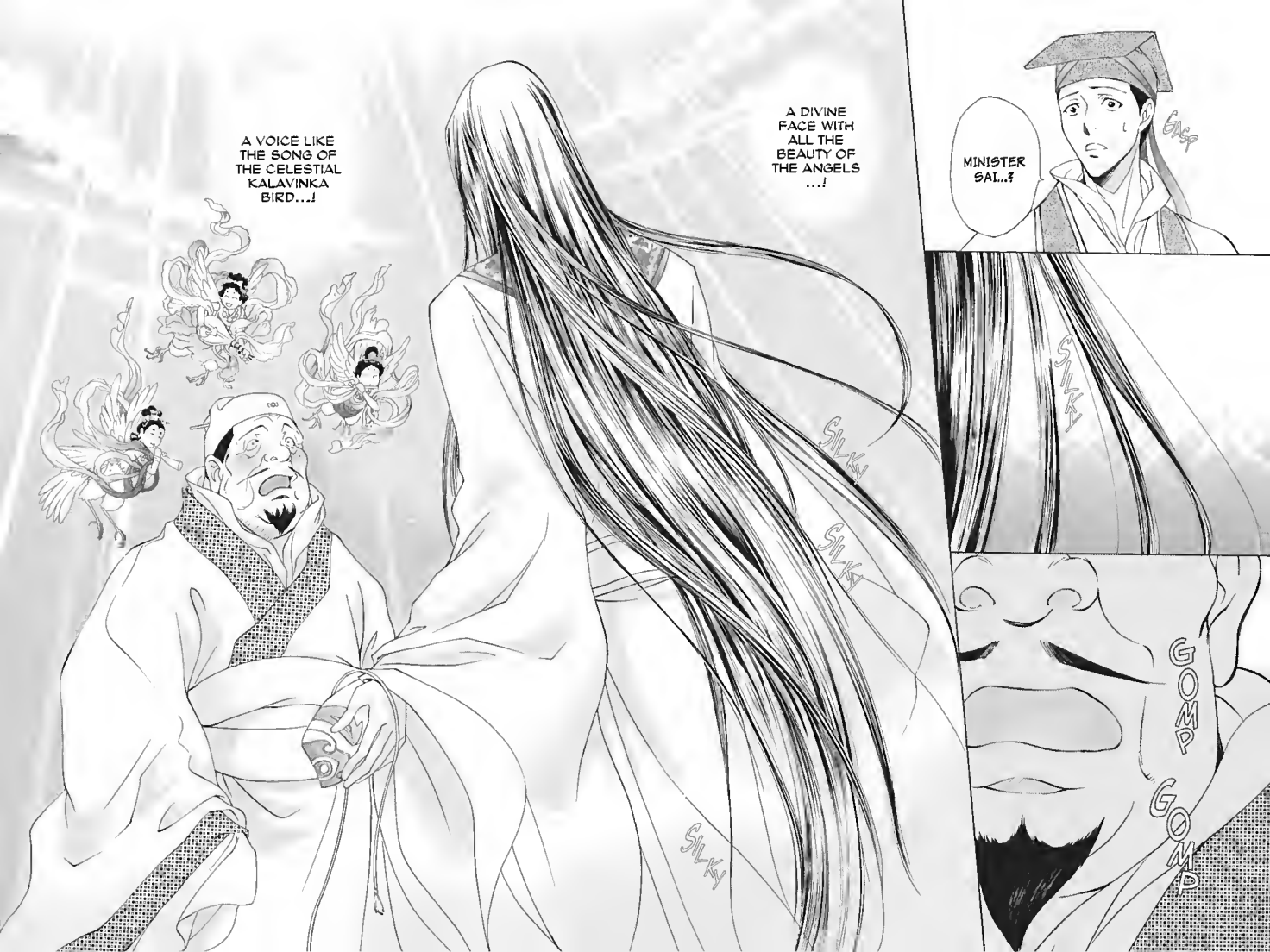
P-PLEASE, DON'T! I BEG YOU! I HAVE A WIFE AND CHILDREN! I DON'T WANT TO BETRAY THEM...!!
KLASP
PLEASE, I'M LIVING A PEACEFUL LIFE! DON'T THROW MY HEART INTO TURMOIL!
WAUGH!
I'VE WORKED HARD TO ATTAIN THIS HIGH POSITION AT MY AGE! DON'T FORCE ME TO LEAVE COURT AND LIVE AS A MONK!
M-MY FIRST GRANDCHILD WILL BE BORN THIS SUMMER! I CAN'T AFFORD TO DIE OF HEART FAILURE NOW!
...

PSST PSST
WHAT IS THIS REACTION? IS HIS FACE SO HORRIFIC?
NOT SO MUCH "HORRIFIC" AS "SO HORRIFICALLY UNBELIEVABLE AS TO LEAVE YOUR HORROR HORRIFIED"...
That's what Lord Kaishin told me...
UNFORTUNATELY, I DON'T KNOW EITHER...
HMM
I WOULDN'T THINK THAT A PERSON AS DISTINGUISHED AS MINISTER KO WOULD BE THOUGHT LESS OF, NO MATTER WHAT KIND OF FACE HE HAD.
Though perhaps I shouldn't be the one to say that.
IT'S NOT THE FACE THAT MAKES THE MAN, AFTER ALL.
SNORT
HEH HEH
ALL THIS FUSS—WHY NOT JUST REMOVE YOUR MASK?
BUT EVERYONE EXCEPT MINISTER SAI MUST TURN HIS BACK. HOW'S THAT?
? ?


EVEN SO, YOU WILL IMMEDIATELY SEE THAT HE IS THE REAL MINISTER KO AND UNDERSTAND WHY HE IS PERMITTED TO WEAR THE MASK.
MRR
BUT I DO NOT KNOW MINISTER KO'S FACE.
IT WOULDN'T DO IF YOU WOUND UP BARRICADING YOURSELF IN THE INNER COURT, YOUR MAJESTY.
DRAT.
MAY WE LOOK ON AS WELL?
NNGH!
DENIED.
Oh!
Oh!
IN THE WORST CASE, YOU MAY WELL LOSE YOUR MIND.
IF YOU DO, YOU WILL LIKELY LOSE ANY ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE ON WORK FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT THREE YEARS, AND YOUR HOME LIFE WILL CRUMBLE.
SMIRK
TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVEN'T SEEN THE MINISTER OF THE TREASURY'S FACE BEFORE, I ADVISE YOU NOT TO GIVE IN TO CURIOSITY AND PEEK.

Please stop!
GULP
...
SUCH BLOOD-LUST...
SILENCE

PLUG
?
SUFF
NOW THEN...
GYA A AAAH
PLEASE WAIT, MINISTER KO!
EAR-STOPPERS! I NEED EAR-STOPPERS!!
DARN IT ALL! I FORGOT ABOUT HIS VOICE!!
P-PLEASE CONTROL YOURSELF, HOJU...
YOU YOUNG ONES MUST PLUG YOUR EARS TOO IF YOU VALUE YOUR SANITY!
AAAH!! MY SUPERIOR HAS FAINTED!


A VOICE LIKE THE SONG OF THE CELESTIAL KALAVINKA BIRD...!
A DIVINE FACE WITH ALL THE BEAUTY OF THE ANGELS ...!
SILKY
SILKY
SILKY
MINISTER SAI...?
GASP
SILKY
GOMP
GOMP
GOMP

A DIVINE FACE WITH ALL THE BEAUTY OF THE ANGELS ...!
MINISTER SAI...?
GASP
SILKY
SILKY
SILKY
SILKY
GOMP
GOMP

A VOICE LIKE THE SONG OF THE CELESTIAL KALAVINKA BIRD...!

...
It's as I feared...
SUCH A BEAUTIFUL FACE...
SUCH BEAUTIFUL HAIR...
SO BEAUTIFUL...
MINISTER SAI?
NOW THEN. ARE YOU QUITE SATISFIED?
NOD
SUCH A BEAUTIFUL VOICE...

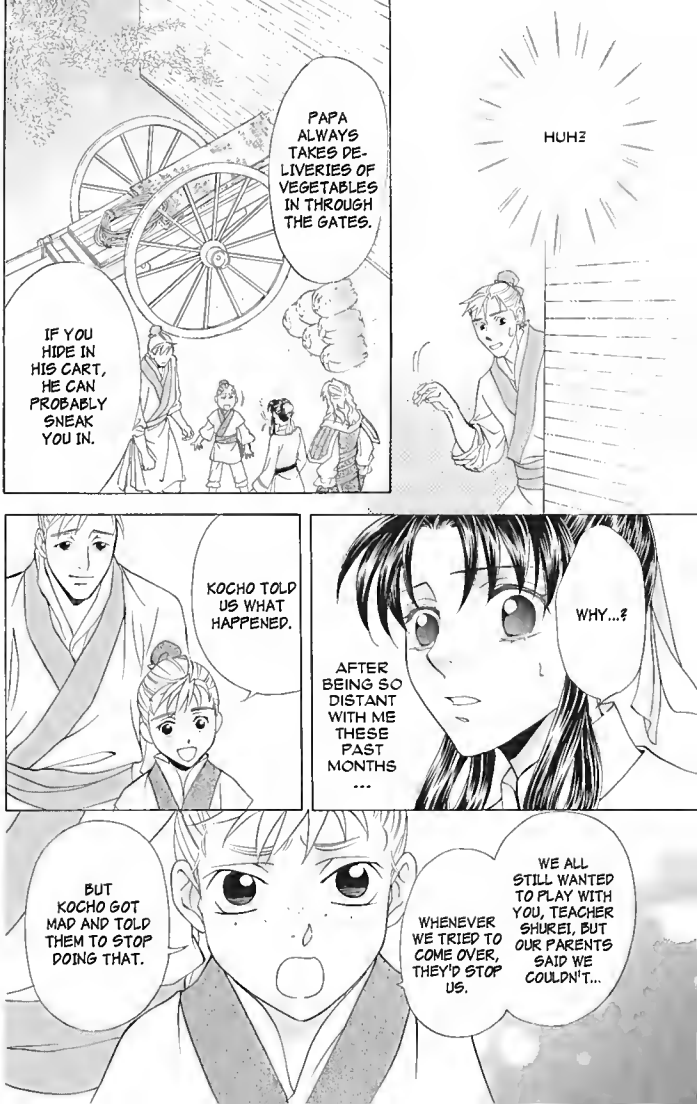
IT WAS YOU WHO WAS BEHIND THE ATTACKS ON INDUCTEE HONG AND REISHIN HONG, CORRECT?
NOD
SUFF
AND DO YOU ADMIT TO EMBEZZLING THE GENERAL FUND AND USING THAT MONEY TO BRIBE YOUR WAY INTO PROMOTIONS?
SILKY
SILKY
SILKY
NOD
NOD
NOD
LASTLY, DO YOU CONFESS THAT YOU ATTEMPTED TO PLACE THE BLAME FOR ALL YOUR CRIMES ON OFFICIAL RO?
?
?
YURI, LORD ADVISOR SHO AND LORD ADVISOR SOU, YOU SHALL SERVE AS WITNESSES TO THIS TESTIMONY.
THAT SHOULD DO FOR A CONFESSION.

IT IS ALL FACT.
HOJU... CAN THIS TESTIMONY BE CONSIDERED LEGITIMATE?
WELL, YES, BUT...
I HAVE THE TESTIMONIES OF THE FOOLS WHO INSTIGATED THROWING MUD AT INITIATE HONG AS WELL. WHAT'S NOT LEGITIMATE?
SWIP
KLOK
IT'S FINE. IN FACT, I THINK WE SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS FROM THE START.

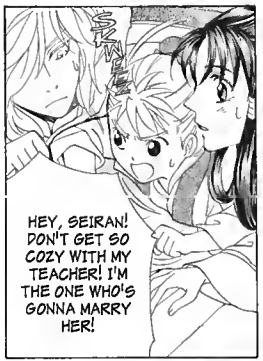
SO YOU'VE COME, REISHIN HONG!

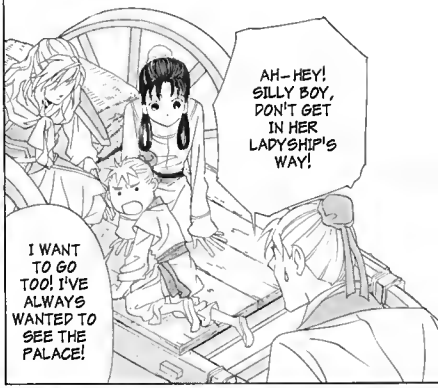
WHAT? YOU WON'T LET US PASS?!
YOU HEAR ANYTHING ABOUT THIS?
NOT REALLY ...
"NOT REALLY"?!
YOU TWO HAVE BEEN BRIBED, HAVEN'T YOU? TELL ME BY WHOM AND HOW MUCH!
I AM SHUREI HONG! I WAS ORDERED TO ATTEND THIS INQUEST.

MRR
EVERY GUARD AT EVERY GATE HAS BEEN BRIBED. WHOEVER THIS ENEMY IS, HE REALLY DOESN'T WANT ME TO GET TO THAT INQUEST.
...!
NOW BE OFF WITH YOU!
I ALREADY TOLD YOU I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.
TEACHER SHUREI!
MY LADY... IN THIS CASE, PERHAPS KNOCKING THESE TWO OUT WOULD BE THE BEST COURSE...
YOU WANT TO GET INTO THE PALACE, RIGHT, TEACHER?
TODAY OF ALL DAYS, I DON'T HAVE TIME TO PLAY WITH YOU.
THIS WAY!
HUH? IS THAT YOU, RYUSHIN?


HUH?
PAPA ALWAYS TAKES DELIVERIES OF VEGETABLES IN THROUGH THE GATES.
IF YOU HIDE IN HIS CART, HE CAN PROBABLY SNEAK YOU IN.
WHY...?
AFTER BEING SO DISTANT WITH ME THESE PAST MONTHS ...
KOCHO TOLD US WHAT HAPPENED.
WE ALL STILL WANTED TO PLAY WITH YOU, TEACHER SHUREI, BUT OUR PARENTS SAID WE COULDN'T...
WHENEVER WE TRIED TO COME OVER, THEY'D STOP US.
BUT KOCHO GOT MAD AND TOLD THEM TO STOP DOING THAT.

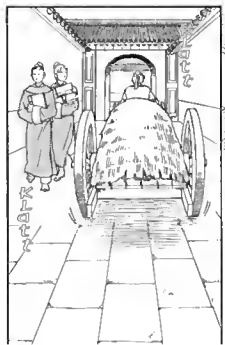
I APOLOGIZE, LADY SHUREI.
IT'S JUST... WE WEREN'T SURE HOW TO TREAT YOU ANYMORE.
RYUSHIN ...
POP
ADULTS ARE SO DUMB!
YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED AT ALL, TEACHER SHUREI!
MISTER RYU...
WE DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE YOU FEEL ASHAMED FOR KNOWING US...
AND YET YOU KEPT MINGLING WITH US COMMON FOLK. W-WE... THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE MOCKED FOR THAT...
CIVIL SERVANTS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE THE ELITE, AREN'T THEY?
NOW HOP ON. INSIDE THE OUTER WALLS, MORE OF THE FOLKS FROM TOWN ARE WAITING TO CARRY YOU AS FAR INTO THE PALACE AS WE CAN.
TH... THANK YOU.

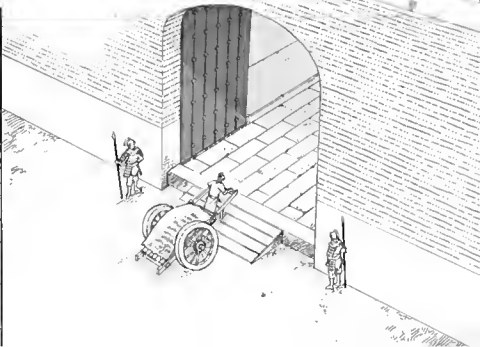

HEY, SEIRAN! DON'T GET SO COZY WITH MY TEACHER! I'M THE ONE WHO'S GONNA MARRY HER!


I WANT TO GO TOO! I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE THE PALACE!
AH- HEY! SILLY BOY, DON'T GET IN HER LADYSHIP'S WAY!

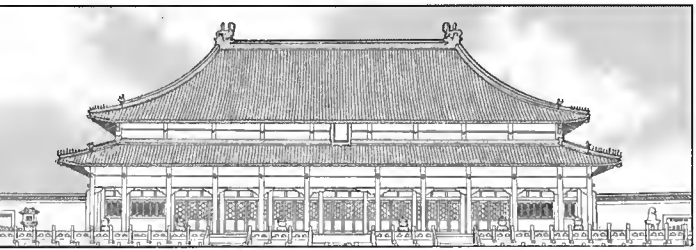
SHHHH...

THERE'S NO HELPING IT, I GUESS. BUT KEEP QUIET.





I'LL DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO REACH THE INQUEST IN TIME!
WE MADE IT!



MY LORD REISHIN...
SILENCE

HOJU IS PERMITTED TO WEAR HIS MASK BECAUSE HE CAN DO THINGS NO OTHER CAN.
AND IN ANY CASE, IF HE WERE ALLOWED TO WALK AROUND UNMASKED, OUR COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT WOULD FALL APART. WHO COULD CONCENTRATE ON WORK WITH HIM AROUND?
I NEVER EXPECTED HE'D BE THIS FOOLISH.
VEEN
IT'S ONLY NOW, AFTER TEN YEARS HAVE PASSED, THAT THE OLDER MEMBERS OF COURT ARE ABLE TO WORK AGAIN WITHOUT BEING HAUNTED BY THE MEMORY OF HOJU'S FACE.
KLAP
JOLT
VWIP
WH-WHAT— WHAT JUST HAPPENED ...?
AUGH!
MIN-ISTER HONG!

EVEN IF BY SOME MILLION-IN-ONE CHANCE YOU ARE INNOCENT, WHAT MATTERS IS THAT I BELIEVE YOU DID IT. THE TRUTH NO LONGER HOLDS ANY CONSEQUENCE.
IT SEEMS YOU'VE BEEN UP TO SOME RATHER INTERESTING THINGS.
HE'S SO UNREASON-ABLE ...!
N-NO, I... I-I DIDN'T DO IT...!
ONCE AGAIN, YOU HAVE DARED TO SULLY THE HONOR OF ONE WHO IS PRECIOUS TO ME.
I LACK THE MERCY TO FORGIVE THE SAME FOOL TWICE.
THESE ARE LETTERS FROM YOUR FAMILY, YOUR RELATIVES AND YOUR CLOSE FRIENDS, ALL CUTTING TIES WITH YOU.
SHFF
AFTER I EXPLAINED THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY WERE QUITE CO-OPERATIVE.
AH...!

I WOULD FURTHER ADVISE YOU TO KEEP WELL AWAY FROM ANY PLACE WITH EVEN THE SLIGHTEST TIE TO THE HONG CLAN IF YOU VALUE YOUR WELL-BEING.
YOUR FAMILY'S HOLDINGS HAVE BEEN SEIZED BY MY CLAN.
OTHERWISE YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF DEPOSITED IN THE NEAREST RIVER, FASTENED TO SOMETHING SUBSTANTIALLY HEAVY.
WHAT PLACE IN THIS WORLD DOESN'T HAVE TIES TO THE HONG CLAN?!
FRET
FRET
THAT...
MY CLAN IS VERY MUCH LIKE ME, YOU SEE... ONCE ANGERED, OUR HAND CANNOT BE RESTRAINED. AND WE NEVER RELINQUISH WHAT WE HAVE COMMITTED TO.
A HUNDRED YEARS COULD PASS AND WE STILL WILL NOT HAVE FORGOTTEN YOUR NAME AND FACE.
WAP

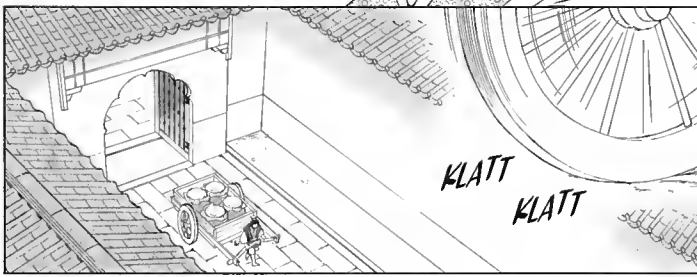
THUMP
SHIVER
SCARY...
...
P-PLEASE... NO MORE OF THIS..!
GROVEL
UNFORTUNATELY FOR YOU, I MAKE IT A RULE TO NEVER LET UP ON RUINING THOSE WHO HAVE EARNED MY IRE.
IF...IF I HAD BUT KNOWN YOU WERE THE HEAD OF THE HONG CLAN...!
I SEE. BUT EVEN IF I HAD NOT BEEN THE HEAD OF MY CLAN, THE CONSEQUENCES WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH THE SAME.
WELL, NOT THAT IT MATTERS, AS YOUR FATE IS ALREADY SEALED.

SNFF
HOW DARE YOU MOCK MY WARD, CALLING HIM AN "ABANDONED CHILD" ALL THOSE YEARS AGO?
DESPITE THAT, YOU STILL HAD THE NERVE TO COME COILING ABOUT HIM AFTER HE HAD RISEN IN THE RANKS...
I ALREADY DECIDED ON THAT DAY LONG AGO THAT YOU COULD NEVER EARN MY FORGIVENESS.
AH, THAT REMINDS ME.
FWAK
?!
THE EXPRESSION I NEVER WANTED TO SEE ON KOYU'S FACE... THIS CRETIN HAD PUT IT THERE!

THE RING OF THE SA CLAN?! OR AN IMITATION OF IT...
THAT WAS WHERE HE HID IT?!
TUMP
RWL
RWL
?!
THAT'S...
I'M TAKING THIS AS WELL.
AHH... BUT THAT...
IF YOU MEANT TO TAKE THIS TO THE SA CLAN TO BEG FOR THEIR HELP, IT'S USELESS. I'VE ALREADY CONTACTED THEM...
...AND INFORMED THEM YOUR RING IS A FAKE.
THIS CAN'T BE!

SLUMP
...

DID YOU THINK I WOULD LEAVE YOU EVEN A SINGLE PATH OF ESCAPE?


KLATT
KLATT

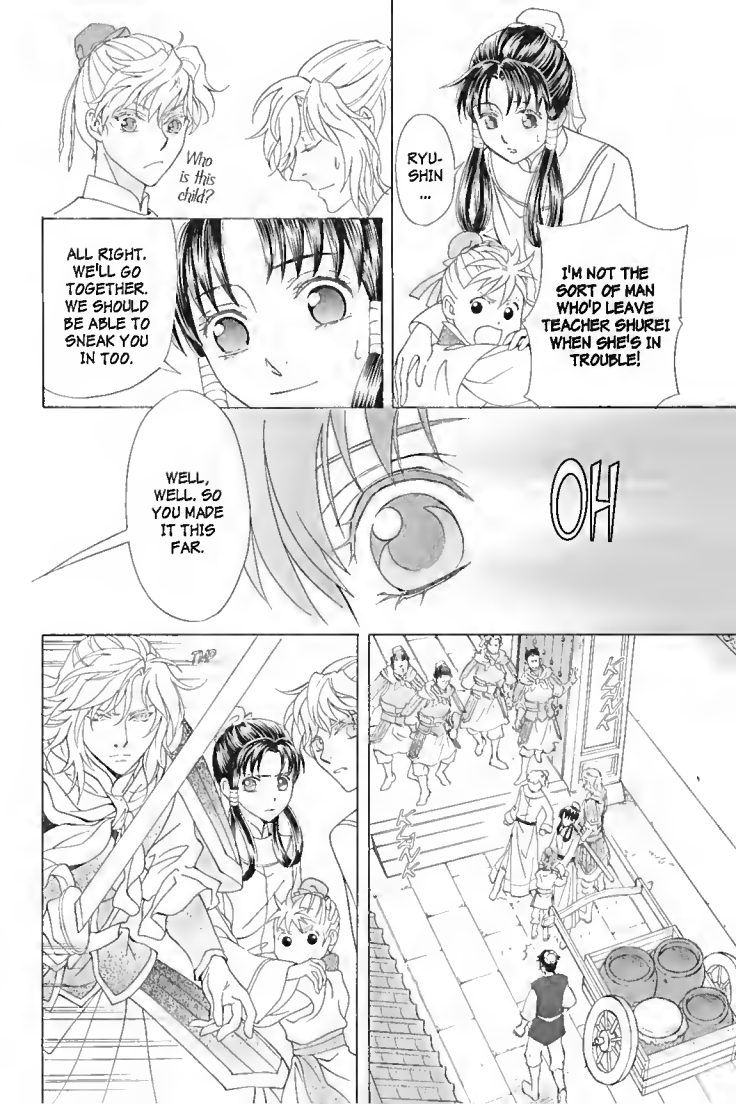
ALL CLEAR, SHUREI!

SWIP
SWIP

AHH!
SORRY I CAN'T TAKE YOU ANY FARTHER IN THAN THIS, SHUREI.
NO, THIS IS MORE THAN ENOUGH.
ALL THESE KIND VILLAGERS, SOME OF WHOM I ONLY KNEW BY SIGHT...
...CAME TO MY RESCUE TODAY.
IT MAKES ME SO HAPPY.
SORRY AGAIN ABOUT THE WAY WE ACTED.
PLEASE COME BY THE SHOP. AS AN APOLOGY, I'LL GIVE YOU A SPECIAL DISCOUNT!
REALLY?! THEN I ABSOLUTELY WILL!
Er...
THAT YOUNG MASTER OVER THERE SAID HE'D ESCORT YOU THE REST OF THE WAY.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?
I FIGURED THEY'D TRY SOMETHING LIKE THIS, SO I CAME TO ESCORT YOU.
HAKU?!
UNLIKE YOU, WHO ARE NOBLE IN NAME BUT NOT WEALTH, I AM ACQUAINTED WITH SEVERAL OF THE HIGH-RANKING OFFICIALS.
I'LL GET YOU INTO THE COURT.
*Ranking Exam: One section of the Imperial Civil Exam. Answers are given orally.
HMPH! WHAT IDIOCY. IF THEY COULD HAVE HEARD YOUR ANSWERS DURING THE RANKING EXAM, THEY WOULD HAVE NEVER DARED SUGGEST YOU DIDN'T DESERVE YOUR RANK.
HAKUMEI ...!
THE RUMORS THE MINISTRY OF RITES SPREAD ABOUT YOU QUICKLY FILTERED DOWN TO THE REST OF US.

DON'T GET THE WRONG IDEA! IT JUST ANNOYS ME TO THINK THAT I'D BE LEFT WITH NOTHING BUT BRAINLESS INDUCTEES AROUND ME.
NEVER FORGET THAT YOU OUTSCORED ME ON THE EXAM. NOW GO SHOW THOSE BRAINLESS DOLTS WHO'VE BEEN MOCKING YOU ONLY BECAUSE YOU'RE FEMALE. GO SHOW THEM WHAT YOU CAN DO AND THEN COME BACK TO US!
I WILL.
ALL RIGHT, I'M OFF. THANK YOU FOR BRINGING ME THIS FAR, SIR.
ALL RIGHT! DO YOUR BEST!
COME ON, WE'D BEST GO, RYUSHIN. YOUR PA IS WAITING FOR YOU.
NO!


Who is this child?
RYU-SHIN ...
I'M NOT THE SORT OF MAN WHO'D LEAVE TEACHER SHURE! WHEN SHE'S IN TROUBLE!
ALL RIGHT. WE'LL GO TOGETHER. WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SNEAK YOU IN TOO.
OH
WELL, WELL. SO YOU MADE IT THIS FAR.

THERE ARE TOO MANY.
CAN I DEFEAT THEM AND PROTECT FOUR PEOPLE AT THE SAME TIME?
INDUCTEE HEKI, ARE YOU TRAINED AT ALL TO FIGHT?
BLUNT
THE HEKI CLAN CLAIMS ITS ACCOMPLISH-MENTS IN THE LITERARY AND DRAMATIC ARTS.
WE HAVE NO ASSOCIATION AT ALL WITH THE MARTIAL ARTS!!
I'M NOT SURPRISED.
IF I HAD JUST ONE MORE ALLY...!
WHO ARE YOU?!
GYAAH!
THOK

IT'S BEEN A WHILE, PRINCESS! SEIRAN!

SLUMP

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

Chapter 34
THUNK
ENSEI ?!
HEY, DON'T JUST STAND THERE.
SEIRAN AND I WILL TAKE CARE OF THIS. GET GOING!
MY LADY, THERE'S NO TIME TO SPARE. WE WILL FOLLOW SHORTLY.
UNDER-STOOD.

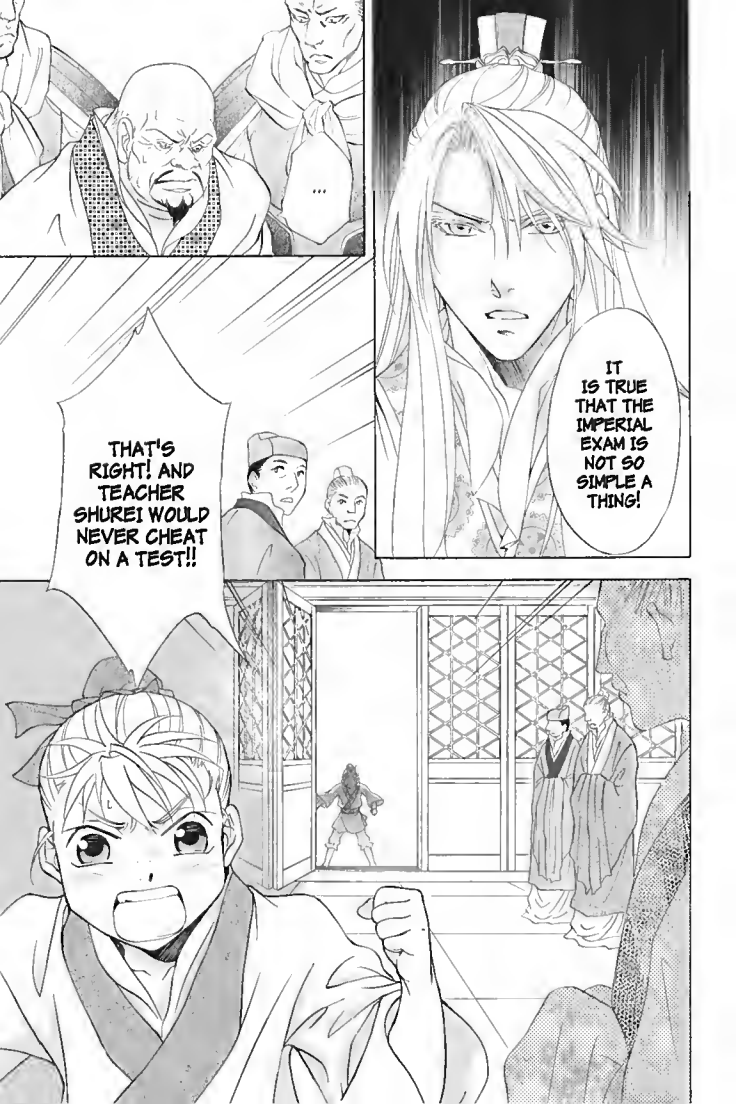
DASH
IT'S ALMOST NOON!
IT APPEARS, MINISTER SAI, THAT THERE ARE YET MORE CRIMES OF WHICH YOU ARE GUILTY.
YOU HAVE ATTEMPTED ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS TO MURDER INDUCTEES HONG AND TOH. HAVE YOU NOT?
!
THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD HAVE CHANGED THE START TIME OF THE FIRST ASSEMBLY IN BOTH THEIR LETTERS WAS YOU, AS YOU ARE THE MINISTER WHO IS THE LAST TO SIGN OFF ON ALL CORRESPONDENCE.
YOU THEN HIRED MEMBERS OF THE 16TH GUARD TO AMBUSH THEM AT THE PALACE GATES.

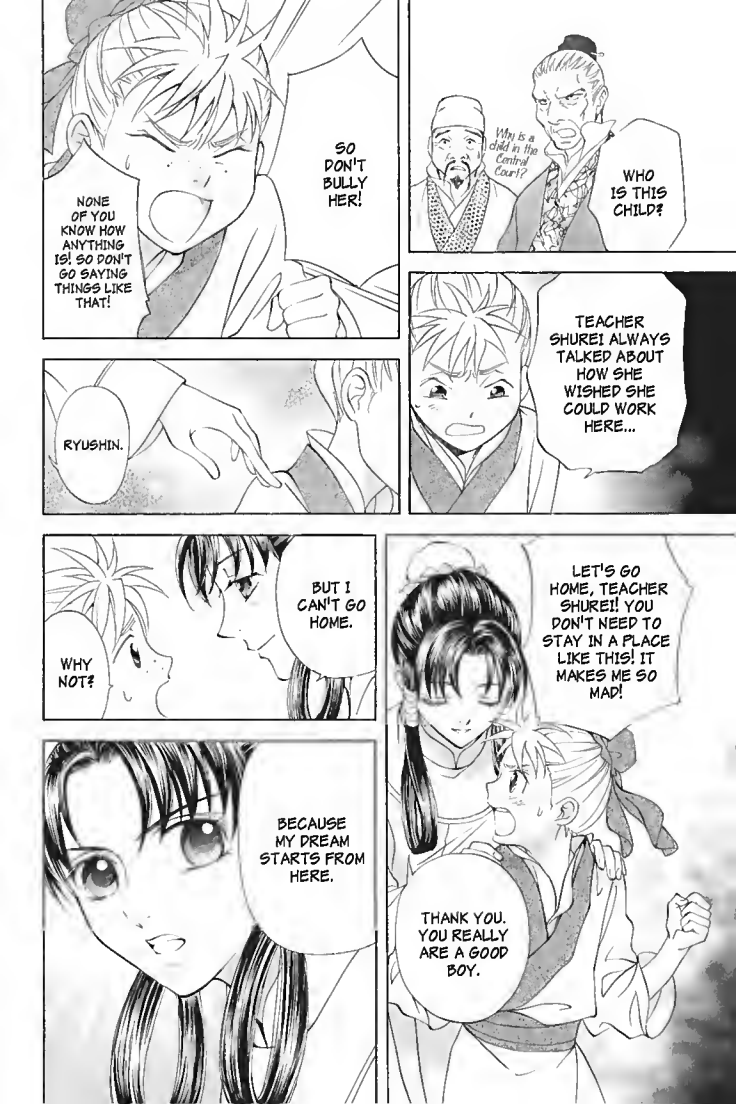
THAT WAS... BUT A WARNING ...
BECAUSE THERE WERE MANY IN COURT WHO WISHED THEM ILL.
B-BMP
TRUE. AND WE WOULD ENCOURAGE THEM TO RECONSIDER THEIR STANCE.
THEN YOU HAD THE CHOPSTICKS THEY USED AT LUNCHTIME POISONED EACH DAY.
AND IN THE ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF PAPERWORK YOU SENT THEM DAILY, YOU INSERTED POISONED SHEETS.
ALL OF THESE WERE REMOVED BEFORE THEY COULD REACH THEIR TARGET AND PRESERVED AS EVIDENCE.
SHUEI, REMIND ME OF THAT OFFICIAL'S NAME?
SIRE, HIS NAME WAS OFFICIAL WA.
JO4
YOU REMEMBER OFFICIAL WA, DON'T YOU, MINISTER SAI? HE WAS ONE OF YOUR TOADIES, WAS HE NOT?
HE AND THE OTHERS WHO DID YOUR BIDDING HAVE ALL CONFESSED.
THEY SAY THAT IN EXCHANGE FOR MONEY AND PROMOTIONS, THEY COMMITTED SEVERAL CRIMES AT YOUR BEHEST.

THEY MANAGED TO SPOT THE DISCREPANCIES ...?
BUT HOW...?
THE REPORT CITING YOUR EMBEZZLEMENT WAS COMPILED BY INDUCTEES HONG AND TOH.
...!
THINKING IT MIGHT HELP THE CASE AGAINST YOU TODAY, THEY SPENT ALL OF LAST NIGHT FINISHING THIS REPORT. IT WAS HANDED TO MINISTER KO THIS MORNING.
AND THEY KEPT TRACK OF THEM TO USE IN THEIR REPORT FOR OFFICIAL RO.
AS THE TASKS OF SORTING DOCUMENTS AND RECHECKING CALCULATIONS WERE LEFT TO THEM, THEY NOTICED THE MANY ODD EXPENSES.
YOU WOUND UP DELIVERING THE PROOF OF YOUR OWN WRONGDOING STRAIGHT INTO THE HANDS OF THE FEMALE CIVIL SERVANT WHOM YOU DISDAIN.
SHK
SHK
...
...WAS TO BLAME...

REEL
YES, I STARTED THE RUMOR THAT HER RESULTS HAD BEEN TAMPERED WITH!
A LITTLE GIRL WALKING RIGHT IN HERE AS THOUGH SHE HAD A RIGHT TO!
IT ALL WENT WRONG BECAUSE WOMEN WERE ALLOWED IN!
*Tanka: The title given to the examinee who ranks third overall.
BUT HOW COULD I NOT THINK THAT?! THE VERY FIRST YEAR WOMEN ARE ALLOWED TO SIT FOR THE EXAM, AND A MERE GIRL OF SEVENTEEN COMES IN AND TAKES THE RANK OF TANKA?!
THE IMPERIAL EXAM IS NOT SO SIMPLE A THING!
THAT SHE DIDN'T RECEIVE AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE IS UNTHINK-ABLE!
EVERYONE THOUGHT THE SAME!
EVERY-ONE!!
IT IS EVEN MORE LIKELY WHEN YOU CONSIDER THAT SHE IS OF THE HONG CLAN AND SPONSORED BY NONE OTHER THAN ITS HEAD, REISHIN HONG....!!

THAT WAS THE CAVEAT UPON WHICH THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR INTRODUCED THE EXAM TO OUR COUNTRY.
IF THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM IS NOT PASSED ON MERIT ALONE, WE CANNOT ACKNOWLEDGE IT.
YOUR MAJESTY, I THOUGHT THE SAME.
WHY WAS THAT?
IT'S TRUE THE EMPEROR AND HIS ADVISORS WERE ODDLY VEHEMENT IN THEIR PURSUIT OF PASSING THE MEASURE ALLOWING WOMEN TO TAKE THE EXAM.
...
YOU, WHO HAVE EACH PASSED THE EXAM, KNOW THAT BETTER THAN ANYONE.
HE'S RIGHT. WE BEG YOU TO RECONSIDER, YOUR MAJESTY.
JUST AS YOU SHOULD KNOW HOW STRINGENTLY THE EXAM IS GRADED, AND HOW LITTLE POSSIBILITY THERE IS FOR OUTSIDE INFLUENCE.
THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR SET UP A SYSTEM THAT EVEN HE COULD NOT TAMPER WITH.
YOU ARE CORRECT. THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM MUST BE BASED SOLELY ON MERIT.


...
IT IS TRUE THAT THE IMPERIAL EXAM IS NOT SO SIMPLE A THING!
THAT'S RIGHT! AND TEACHER SHUREI WOULD NEVER CHEAT ON A TEST!!


SO DON'T BULLY HER!
NONE OF YOU KNOW HOW ANYTHING IS! SO DON'T GO SAYING THINGS LIKE THAT!
Why is a child in the Central Court?
WHO IS THIS CHILD?
TEACHER SHUREI ALWAYS TALKED ABOUT HOW SHE WISHED SHE COULD WORK HERE...
RYUSHIN.
BUT I CAN'T GO HOME.
WHY NOT?
LET'S GO HOME, TEACHER SHUREI! YOU DON'T NEED TO STAY IN A PLACE LIKE THIS! IT MAKES ME SO MAD!
BECAUSE MY DREAM STARTS FROM HERE.
THANK YOU. YOU REALLY ARE A GOOD BOY.

I HAVE ARRIVED. I AM INDUCTEE HONG!
MRMR
INITIATE HONG. IT IS NOON EXACTLY.
TO APPEASE THOSE AMONG THE COURT WITH SUSPICIONS AGAINST YOUR EXAM RESULTS, WE SHALL BEGIN OUR INQUEST.
I WELCOME YOUR INQUIR-IES, YOUR MAJESTY.

A PUBLICALLY HELD ORAL EXAM SHOULD CLEAR ALL SUSPICIONS OF CHEATING OR FAVORITISM, WE BELIEVE.
LET US ADJOURN FROM THIS HALL.
WE SHALL HOLD THE INQUEST WHERE ALL WHO HARBOR DOUBTS AGAINST INDUCTEE HONG MAY ATTEND AND HEAR.
I CAN'T LET IT END HERE.
I HAVEN'T EVEN BEGUN MY WORK AS A CIVIL SERVANT YET!

Shurei dealt with the inquest admirably.
She answered question after question without hesitation...
...leaving the entire assemblage of officials thunderstruck.
KOFF
LASTLY, INDUCTEE HONG... WHY IS IT THAT YOU, BEING A WOMAN, WISH TO BECOME A CIVIL SERVANT?

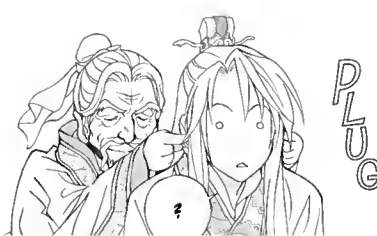
PLEASE EXCUSE MY AUDACITY, BUT IF I AM TO BE ASKED WHY I WISH TO DO ANYTHING "BEING A WOMAN," I MUST REPLY THAT I HAVE NO ANSWER.
FOR WHETHER I AM A MAN OR A WOMAN, I PASSED THE EXAM.
I CAME HERE TO DO WHATEVER IT IS I CAN DO...
...TO BECOME A CIVIL SERVANT AND PROTECT A GREAT MANY PEOPLE WITH MY OWN HANDS.

THAT IS WHY I TOOK THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM.

By the next day, the eyes that regarded Shurei had greatly changed.
Having been allowed to attend the trial and see her abilities firsthand, the other inductees no longer whispered when she passed.

In the Ministry of Rites, all the high-ranked officials had been removed along with Minister Sai...
...and Official Ro, receiving his promotion at long last, was inaugurated as the new Minister of Rites.
INDUCTEE HONG. HAVE YOU FINISHED THE MORNING DUTIES ASSIGNED TO YOU?
...
YES SIR! I JUST MADE MY DELIVERIES, OFFICIAL RO-
THAT IS- MINISTER RO!
HE MADE SUCH AN ODD FACE...
Not used to his new title

The evaluation period of the inductees was drawing to a close.
The day Shurei would become a true civil servant was not long off.

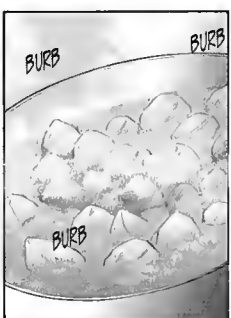

?
PLUG

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

Chapter 35

FWUFF

THOK

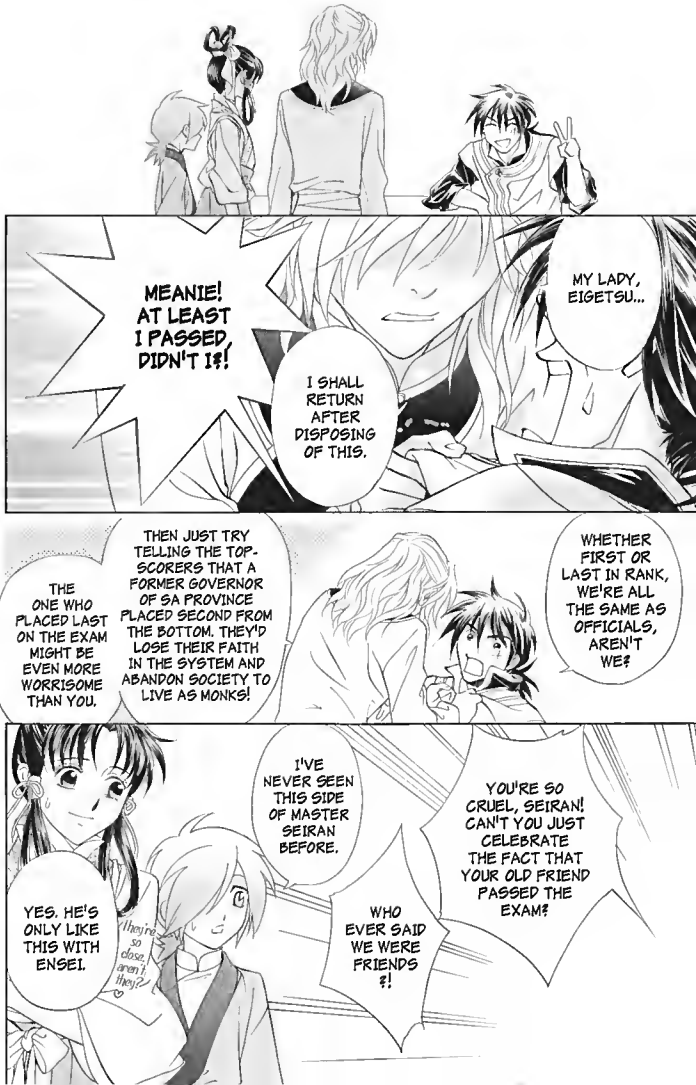

BURB
BURB
BURB

LEAN
SNIFF
SNIFF
JOLT
AH...! WHAT A SCRUMPTIOUS SMELL! ♡
AHH, THIS IS IT! THAT SPECIAL FLAVOR OF THE PRINCESS'S COOKING!
YUM
MUNCH
MUNCH
WAIT!
ENSEI!
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL THIS TIME?!
SLURP
GRIN

IT'S FINE WITH ME, BUT...
PRINCESS, WON'T YOU LET ME FREELOAD HERE AGAIN FOR A WHILE?
HEY THERE, SEIRAN!
...AND WHO'S THIS?
YOU'RE FAR TOO KIND, MY LADY.
OH-HO! NICE GREETING!
I'M ENSEI RO. PLEASED TO MEET YA.
BOW
P-PLEASED TO MEET YOU! I AM EIGETSU TOH!

YOU! LEAVE HERE NOW!
THERE IS NOTHING WORSE THAN A USELESS FREELOADER WITH A MONSTROUS APPETITE.
SO THIS LITTLE GUY PASSED AS THE JOGEN?
WHAT KIND OF BRAIN IS IN HERE?
WAH!
ALL RIGHT, I PROMISE I'LL WASH DISHES AND DO ANY KIND OF HEAVY LIFTING YOU NEED DONE.
OH, DON'T BE SO HEARTLESS! DIDN'T I COME BURSTING IN HEROICALLY TO SAVE YOU WHEN YOU WERE IN TROUBLE?
*Provincial Exam: A test taken to become a provincial official.
HOW ABOUT YOU? DID YOU PASS THE PROVINCIAL EXAM?*
HEH HEH! THANKS.
BUT ALL THAT ASIDE, YOU SURE HAVE BEEN WORKING HARD, PRINCESS! PASSING THE EXAM AS THE TANKA... THAT'S SOMETHING!

...
CONGRATULATIONS!
CONGRATULATIONS! THAT'S WONDERFUL.
I'D NEVER STUDIED SO HARD IN ALL MY LIFE!
I'M GLAD YOU ASKED! I DID PASS AND I AM NOW OFFICIALLY A PROVINCIAL CIVIL SERVANT!
HEH HEH
OOH!
IT MUST HAVE BEEN GOOD. WHAT WAS IT?
HEY! HEY! ASK ME WHAT MY RANK WAS!
2ND
SECOND... FROM THE BOTTOM!


MEANIE! AT LEAST I PASSED, DIDN'T I?!
I SHALL RETURN AFTER DISPOSING OF THIS.
MY LADY, EIGETSU...
THE ONE WHO PLACED LAST ON THE EXAM MIGHT BE EVEN MORE WORRISOME THAN YOU.
THEN JUST TRY TELLING THE TOP-SCORERS THAT A FORMER GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE PLACED SECOND FROM THE BOTTOM. THEY'D LOSE THEIR FAITH IN THE SYSTEM AND ABANDON SOCIETY TO LIVE AS MONKS!
WHETHER FIRST OR LAST IN RANK, WE'RE ALL THE SAME AS OFFICIALS, AREN'T WE?
YES. HE'S ONLY LIKE THIS WITH ENSEI.
They're so close, aren't they?
I'VE NEVER SEEN THIS SIDE OF MASTER SEIRAN BEFORE.
WHO EVER SAID WE WERE FRIENDS ?!
YOU'RE SO CRUEL, SEIRAN! CAN'T YOU JUST CELEBRATE THE FACT THAT YOUR OLD FRIEND PASSED THE EXAM?

KLUFF
WHAT A MEAL! DELICIOUS!
SEE YOU LATER.
WELL, I'M STEPPING OUT FOR A BIT.
AT THIS HOUR?
HE WAS IN A HURRY...

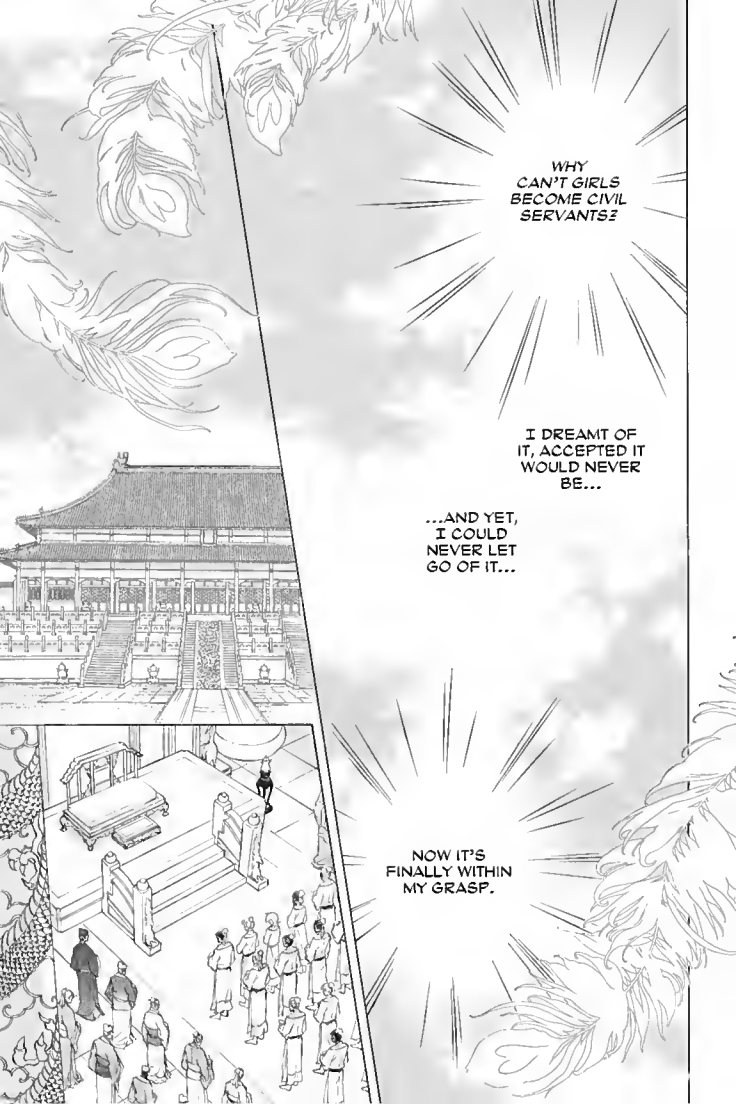
WOW! THAT IS ONE CONVINCING FAKE!
SO THIS IS WHAT THAT OLD TOAD WAS HAVING MADE SO FRANTICALLY? AND HE HID IT UNDER HIS WIG?
THIS OTHER ONE IS POORLY MADE.
BUT IF HE'D HANDED THE FIRST ONE OVER TO THE SA CLAN, WE'D BE IN TROUBLE. THERE'S NO DOUBT THEY WOULD'VE BELIEVED IT WAS THE REAL THING.
SO IT IS A FAKE.
WHERE IN THE WORLD COULD THE REAL ONE BE?

THAT WIGGED GEEZER WAS A FOOL.
IN ANY CASE...
I CAN'T BELIEVE HE DIDN'T NOTICE HIS DAUGHTER FLAUNTING ONE OF THE DISCARDED FAKES SO OUTRAGEOUSLY.
THE RING WAS EVEN CAPTURED IN A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL PORTRAIT AND DELIVERED RIGHT TO VICE MINISTER RI'S HANDS.
He was practically screaming that he was the one behind every thing.
Smirk
WE HAVE GENERAL RAN TO THANK FOR NOTICING THAT DETAIL.
Um... It was nothing...
AS EXPECTED, HE CERTAINLY HAS A KEEN EYE WHEN IT COMES TO THE LADIES.
HO HO HO
ENSEI.
YOUR MAJESTY ?

THE SITUATION HAS DETERIORATED RAPIDLY IN THE PAST YEAR.
HOW DOES SA PROVINCE FARE NOW?
SINCE THE DEATH OF LORD ENJUN SA...
THERE HAS BEEN A POWER STRUGGLE WITHIN THE SA CLAN OVER WHO WILL BE THE NEXT HEAD.
THEY'VE ALL BEEN SEARCHING MADLY FOR THE LOST RING USED BY THE RULER OF THE CLAN.
IF THE MISSING CLAN LEADER'S SIGNET RING HAD BEEN FOUND THIS PAST YEAR...
...I IMAGINE THE FINDER WOULD'VE BROUGHT IT IMMEDIATELY TO THE MAIN SA FAMILY IN HOPES OF RECEIVING A HANDSOME REWARD.
HOWEVER, A FULL YEAR HAS PASSED SINCE THE DEATH OF THEIR PREVIOUS LEADER, AND THE SIGNET RING HASN'T BEEN FOUND. IT'S POSSIBLE THEY'LL ANOINT THE ACTING LEADER AND HAVE A NEW RING MADE.
AND THROUGH IT ALL, THE COMMON PEOPLE BEAR THE BRUNT OF THE STRUGGLE.
IF SOMEONE TROUBLESOME WERE TO WIND UP AS HEAD OF THE SA CLAN, IT COULD CAUSE US MORE PROBLEMS.
THE WILL OF THE SA CLAN RULES ALL OF SA PROVINCE.

WE ARE AWARE OF THAT.
THE ONLY ONE WITH ANY HOPE OF STANDING UP TO THAT CLAN...
...WOULD BE AN OFFICIAL IMPERIAL GOVERNOR WHO FULLY UNDERSTANDS YOUR WILL, YOUR MAJESTY.
AND WE WOULD LIKE YOUR AGREEMENT ON OUR CHOICE.
ARE THERE ANY WHO DISAGREE WITH OUR CHOICE OF GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE?

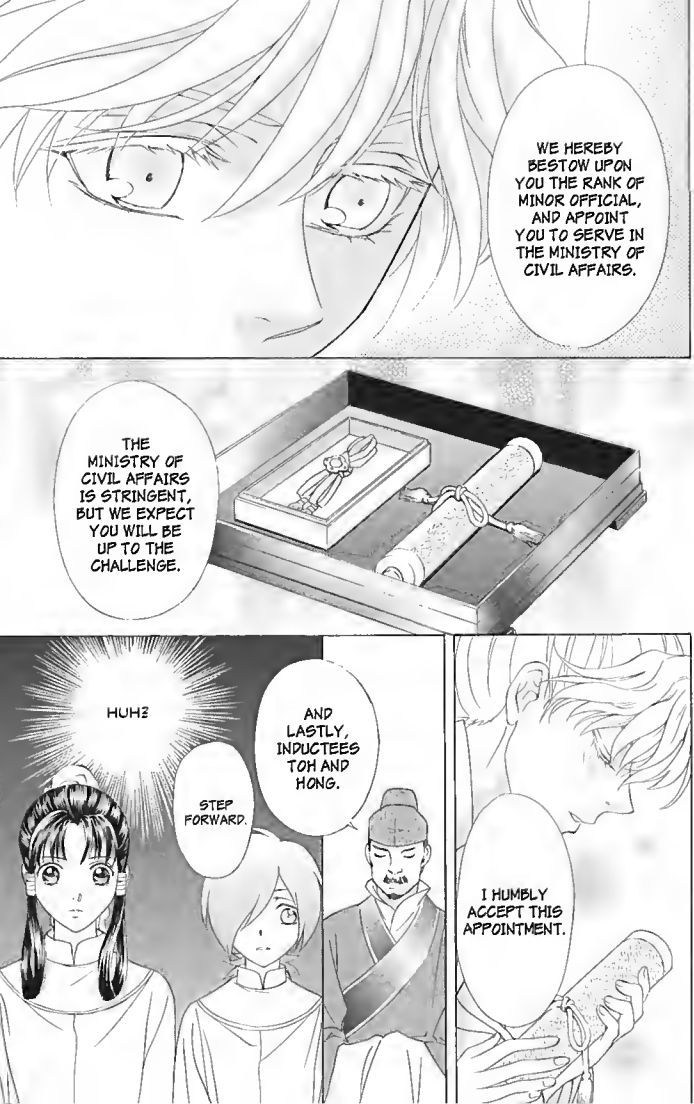
THIS WILL BE THE LAST TIME I WEAR THIS UNIFORM.
WHY NOT?


WHY CAN'T GIRLS BECOME CIVIL SERVANTS?
I DREAMT OF IT, ACCEPTED IT WOULD NEVER BE...
...AND YET, I COULD NEVER LET GO OF IT...
NOW IT'S FINALLY WITHIN MY GRASP.

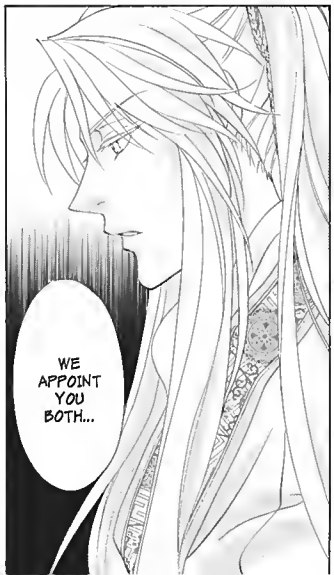
It looks as though the entire court is here.
YES. THIS FEELS MORE LIKE THE INVESTITURE CEREMONY AFTER THE EXAM.
I'VE HEARD THE APPOINTMENT CEREMONY IS USUALLY PERFORMED BY THE MINISTER OF CIVIL AFFAIRS IN HIS OWN MINISTRY.
WHAT OF IT? ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS IS WHERE WE'LL BE APPOINTED.
I'D PREFER TO BE STATIONED OUT IN THE PROVINCES SOMEWHERE.
WITHOUT A DOUBT, I WANT A POST IN THE CENTRAL COURT.
WHAT ABOUT YOU, MISS SHUREI?
FOR ME...
ANYWHERE IS FINE.
I MEAN TO DO MY BEST, NO MATTER WHERE I AM.

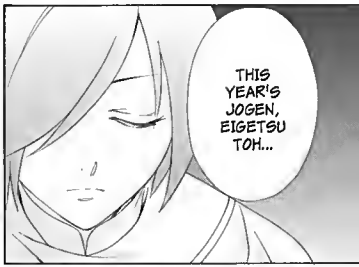
THIS YEAR, THOSE WHO PASSED WITH THE HIGHEST MARKS SHALL RECEIVE THEIR RANKS AND APPOINTMENTS FROM THE HAND OF HIS MAJESTY THE EMPEROR HIMSELF.
Smile
THAT IS THE CORRECT ATTITUDE.
MINISTER RO.
SEARCH CONSTANTLY WITHIN YOURSELVES FOR THE ANSWER, AND YOU SHALL ALWAYS KNOW WHAT IT IS YOU MUST DO.
FOR WHAT PURPOSE DO CIVIL SERVANTS EXIST?
NO MATTER WHAT YOUR RANK, NO MATTER WHAT PLACES YOU ARE SENT, THE DUTY CHARGED TO YOU REMAINS THE SAME.
WHAT INITIATE HONG SAID JUST NOW IS TRUE.

KLANG
KLANG
KLANG
WE SHALL NOW BEGIN THE APPOINTMENT CEREMONY OF THE TOP TWENTY!
THIS MARKS THE TRUE BEGINNING OF YOUR PATHS AS CIVIL SERVANTS!
HAKUMEI HEKI.
YOUR MAJESTY.


WE HEREBY BESTOW UPON YOU THE RANK OF MINOR OFFICIAL, AND APPOINT YOU TO SERVE IN THE MINISTRY OF CIVIL AFFAIRS.
THE MINISTRY OF CIVIL AFFAIRS IS STRINGENT, BUT WE EXPECT YOU WILL BE UP TO THE CHALLENGE.
I HUMBLY ACCEPT THIS APPOINTMENT.
AND LASTLY, INDUCTEES TOH AND HONG.
STEP FORWARD.
HUH?

MEMB
MEMB
WHY BOTH OF US AT ONCE?

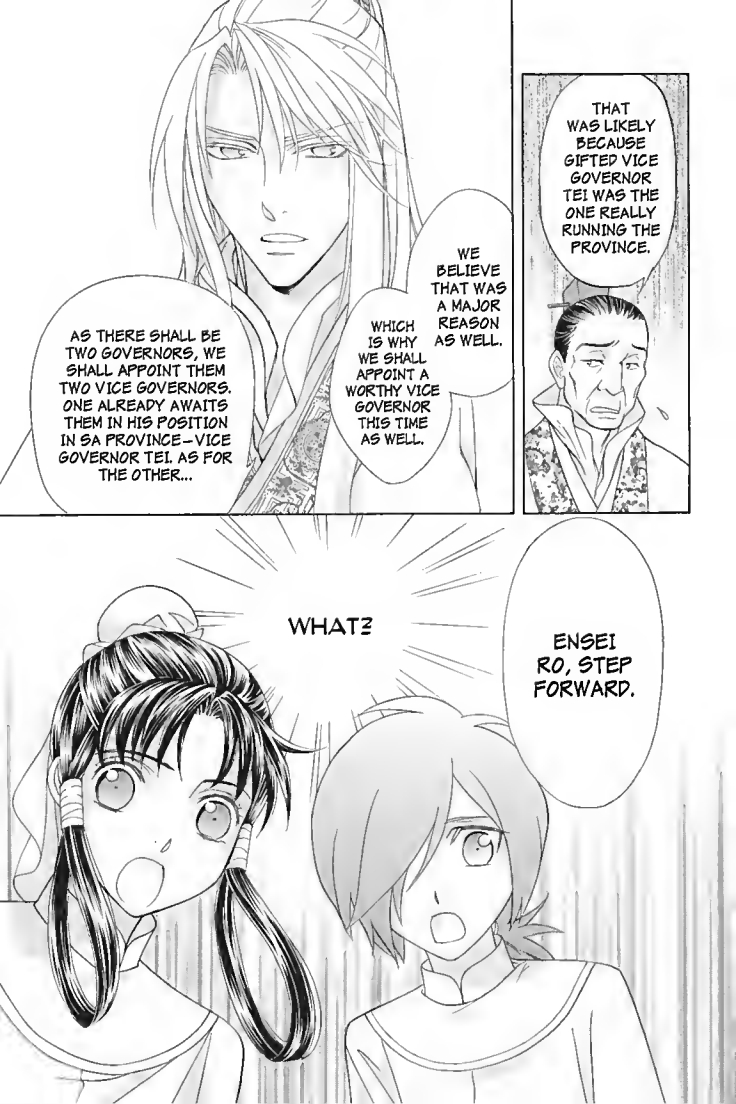

WE APPOINT YOU BOTH...


THIS YEAR'S JOGEN, EIGETSU TOH...

...AND TANKA, SHUREI HONG.

...TO THE POSITION OF GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE!
HUH?
HOW COULD NEW OFFICIALS HOPE TO HANDLE THE GOVERNING OF AN ENTIRE REGION OF OUR COUNTRY?!
Y-YOUR MAJESTY! WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?!
ASTIR
HE JUST SAID...

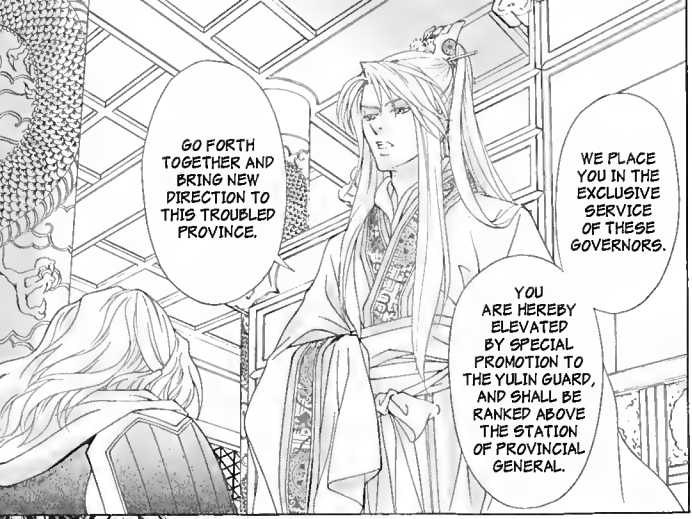
PER-FECTLY? I DON'T BELIEVE –
IT IS BECAUSE THE POSITION IS SPLIT BETWEEN THEM THAT WE BELIEVE THEY WILL FILL IT PERFECTLY.
AND HOW COULD THEY BOTH HOLD THE TITLE AT ONCE?!
SHOCK
IS THERE ANY OTHER WHO WOULD VOLUNTEER HIMSELF?
ERR
THEN WILL YOU TAKE THEIR PLACE AND JOURNEY TO SA PROVINCE?
EVEN WITHOUT RANK OR EXPERIENCE, HE DID AN ADMIRABLE JOB GOVERNING THE PROVINCE.
WITH NO OTHER STEPPING FORWARD, A YOUNG MAN OF LOW BIRTH WHO HAD NOT EVEN TAKEN THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM WAS INSTATED.
THE LAST TIME THIS POSITION WAS TO BE FILLED, THERE WAS WIDESPREAD RESISTANCE TO THE APPOINT-MENT.


AS THERE SHALL BE TWO GOVERNORS, WE SHALL APPOINT THEM TWO VICE GOVERNORS. ONE ALREADY AWAITS THEM IN HIS POSITION IN SA PROVINCE—VICE GOVERNOR TEI. AS FOR THE OTHER...
WHICH IS WHY WE SHALL APPOINT A WORTHY VICE GOVERNOR THIS TIME AS WELL.
WE BELIEVE THAT WAS A MAJOR REASON AS WELL.
THAT WAS LIKELY BECAUSE GIFTED VICE GOVERNOR TEI WAS THE ONE REALLY RUNNING THE PROVINCE.
ENSEI RO, STEP FORWARD.
WHAT?

ENSEI
2!
MISS SHUREI ...
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EARS. WHAT WAS SAID JUST NOW...
I FEEL THE SAME, EIGETSU...
DID I MISHEAR?
ENSEI WAS...

ENSEI...
...WAS THE PREVIOUS GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE ?!
WE HEREBY APPOINT YOU THE OTHER VICE GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE.
AS THE PREVIOUS GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE, WE FEEL YOU WILL GUIDE THESE TWO WELL. JOURNEY WITH THEM TO SA PROVINCE!
YES, YOUR MAJESTY.
I HUMBLY RECEIVE THIS APPOINTMENT.
MMM
HE PASSED THE PROVINCIAL EXAMS THIS YEAR.
HE HAS FULL QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE JOB.
FURTHER, HE HAS PROVEN SUCCESSES BEHIND HIM, HAVING HAD SERVED IN THE MOST TRYING POSITION OF SA PROVINCE GOVERNOR.
TO OVERLOOK A PERSON OF SUCH ABILITY WOULD BE A WASTE OF RARE TALENT.

ENSEI ...
I PLACED SECOND FROM THE BOTTOM ON MY EXAM...
Uh... This is getting a little embarrassing.
NEXT, IN LIGHT OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN SA PROVINCE, WE SHALL ASSIGN AN ELITE SOLDIER TO GUARD OUR GOVERNORS.
SEIRAN SHI.
YOUR MAJESTY.
SEIRAN ?!


GO FORTH TOGETHER AND BRING NEW DIRECTION TO THIS TROUBLED PROVINCE.
WE PLACE YOU IN THE EXCLUSIVE SERVICE OF THESE GOVERNORS.
YOU ARE HEREBY ELEVATED BY SPECIAL PROMOTION TO THE YULIN GUARD, AND SHALL BE RANKED ABOVE THE STATION OF PROVINCIAL GENERAL.

OH
YOSEI! YOU MONGREL ...
RAIEN, LOOK.

...
TWIK TWIK

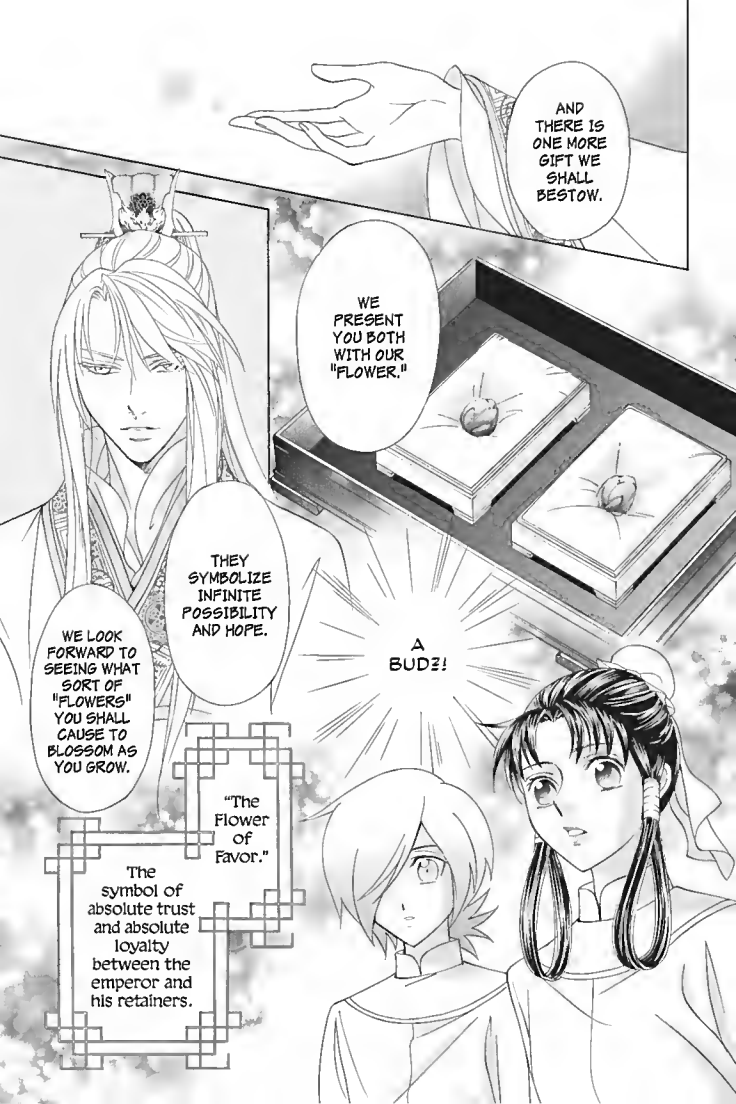
So he's Yulin Guard only in name, eh?
HE TRICKED ME.
AND HE GOT HIMSELF A NICE POSITION.

LONG SEALED AWAY, THESE SWORDS ARE TRUE NATIONAL TREASURES...
THAT'S ...

THESE ARE THE TWIN SWORDS ONCE CARRIED BY OUR BELOVED OLDER BROTHER.
FORGED FROM THE SAME STONE, THESE SWORDS ARE BROTHERS AS WELL.
"GAN JIANG" ...
AND "MO YE" ...
THOUGH AT THE TIME WE WERE SO YOUNG WE COULD NOT LIFT IT.
IT IS OUR ONE MEMENTO OF OUR BROTHER.
THOUGH BOTH SWORDS WERE BESTOWED UPON HIM, OUR BROTHER SEIEN PRESENTED US WITH "MO YE."

HOWEVER, WE PRESENT TO YOU "GAN JIANG," THE SWORD OUR BROTHER USED.
"MO YE" IS MY TREASURE.
IT IS WELL-SUITED TO YOU.
I HUMBLY RECEIVE THIS SWORD, YOUR MAJESTY.

NOW AT LAST, INDUCTEES TOH AND HONG...
AS YOU MAY HAVE HEARD FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES, SA PROVINCE IS WROUGHT WITH PERILS.
EVEN SO, WILL YOU GO?
YES!
OH
WE HUMBLY ACCEPT THIS APPOINTMENT!
THEN WE HEREBY BESTOW UPON YOU BOTH THE RANK AND UNIFORM OF GOVERNOR, AND DO ENTRUST TO YOU THIS BADGE AND SEAL OF THE GOVERNOR-SHIP OF SA PROVINCE.
ONE OF YOU SHALL CARRY THE BADGE, AND THE OTHER THE SEAL, FOR YOU GOVERN TOGETHER.


AND THERE IS ONE MORE GIFT WE SHALL BESTOW.
WE PRESENT YOU BOTH WITH OUR "FLOWER."
THEY SYMBOLIZE INFINITE POSSIBILITY AND HOPE.
WE LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING WHAT SORT OF "FLOWERS" YOU SHALL CAUSE TO BLOSSOM AS YOU GROW.
A BUD?!
"The Flower of Favor."
The symbol of absolute trust and absolute loyalty between the emperor and his retainers.

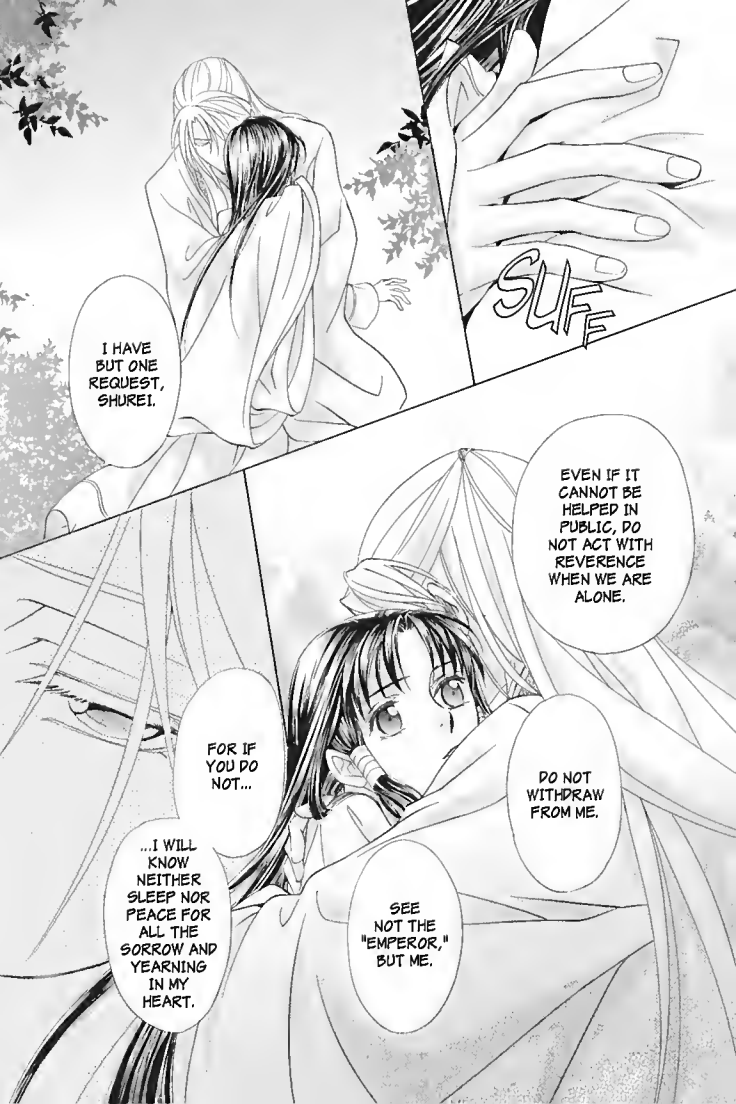
ONCE THOSE BUDS HAVE FULLY BLOSSOMED, WE SHALL AGAIN PRESENT YOU WITH A "FLOWER" IN FULL BLOOM.
THE FLOWERS WILL SERVE AS A MEASURE OF PROTECTION WHEN THEY REACH SA PROVINCE.
THEY ARE ALSO A TESTAMENT THAT THESE TWO ARE MEANT TO RETURN SOMEDAY AND SERVE AT HIS MAJESTY'S SIDE.
THE FLOWERS MEAN THAT ANY WHO HARASS THEM BECOME ENEMIES OF THE EMPEROR HIMSELF ...
IT'S ALMOST IRRITAT-ING HOW PERFECT A MESSAGE OF BLESSING HE CONVEYED WITH THOSE GIFTS.
AND WITH THAT...
...THEY EMBARK ON THE FIRST JOINT GOVERNORSHIP IN HISTORY!

SHUREI.
RYUKI?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
SHUREI ...
WE... HAVE FELT CONFLICTED.
OH...
WE SAID BEFORE THAT WE WISHED TO SPEAK WITH YOU AFTER THE CEREMONY, DID WE NOT?

WHAT WE TRULY WISH IS TO KEEP YOU BY OUR SIDE.
WE SIGNED THE DECREE OF YOUR GOVERNORSHIP WITH A HEAVY HEART.
THE TRUTH IS, WE DO NOT WANT YOU TO GO TO SA PROVINCE.
SHFF
THOUGH IT HURTS A BIT TO ADMIT IT, YOU DON'T NEED ME ANYMORE.
AND IT'S NOT JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE MASTER KOYU AND GENERAL RAN TO HELP YOU.
BUT YOU ARE MORE THAN CAPABLE OF CARRYING ON WITHOUT ME.
DON'T DOUBT ME!
HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE SAID IT? WE LOVE YOU!
YOU'RE WRONG!

I CAN'T DO THAT...
WE WISH... FOR YOU TO STAND—NOT BELOW US— BUT AT OUR SIDE.
WE KNOW. WE DO NOT ASK THAT OF YOU RIGHT NOW.
I CAN'T BECOME AN EMPRESS. WHAT I STRIVE FOR IS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.
BUT PLEASE REMEMBER THIS.
WE HAVE NO INTENTION OF MARRYING ANYONE BUT YOU.
SHURE! ...
WHY?
THAT'S IMPOS-SIBLE.
DO YOU NOT LOVE ME?

I DO LOVE YOU.
BUT IT PROBABLY ISN'T THE KIND OF LOVE YOU'RE SEEKING.
IT IS ENOUGH.
WE WILL SAY IT JUST ONCE MORE. WE DESIRE NO EMPRESS WHO IS NOT YOU.
THIS ENTIRE YEAR PAST, WE HAVE STAYED ALONE.
IT WILL ONLY BE A MATTER OF REPEATING IT FROM HERE ON.
BUT EVEN SO...
...WE ARE LONELY.

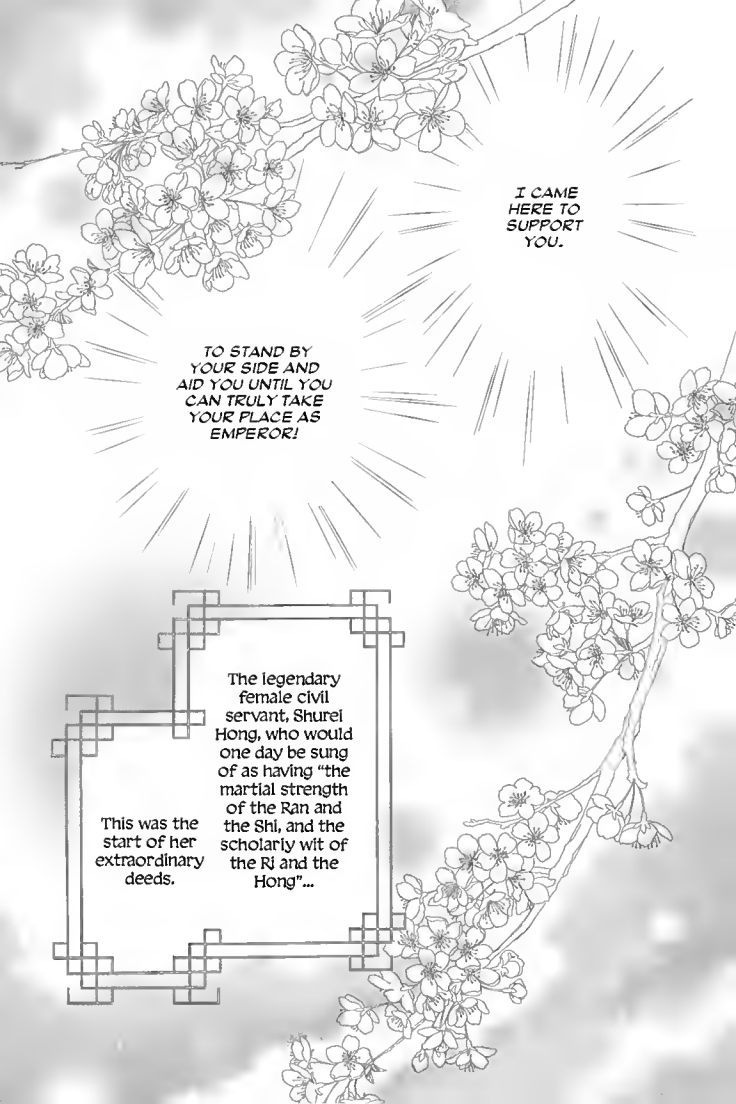

I HAVE BUT ONE REQUEST, SHUREI.
SUFE
EVEN IF IT CANNOT BE HELPED IN PUBLIC, DO NOT ACT WITH REVERENCE WHEN WE ARE ALONE.
DO NOT WITHDRAW FROM ME.
SEE NOT THE "EMPEROR," BUT ME.
FOR IF YOU DO NOT...
...I WILL KNOW NEITHER SLEEP NOR PEACE FOR ALL THE SORROW AND YEARNING IN MY HEART.

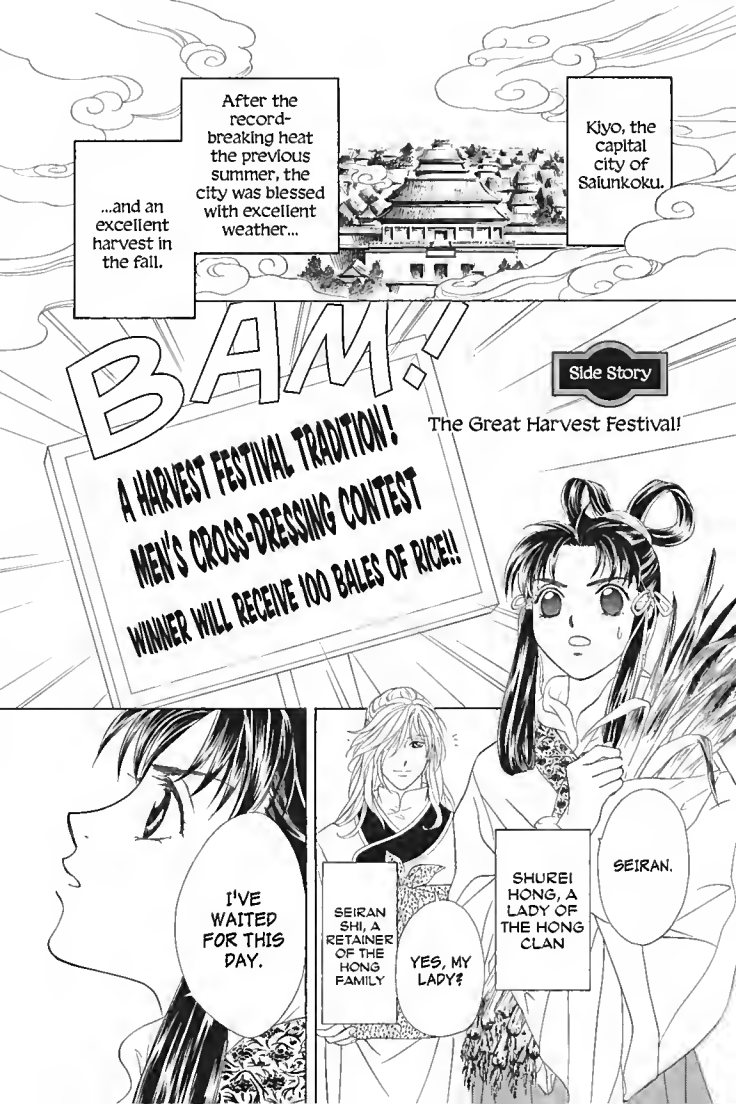
I HAVE ONLY BECOME THE EMPEROR THAT YOU SAW IN ME. IT'S UNFAIR OF YOU TO FLEE FROM ME NOW.
I DO NOT ASK YOU TO RETURN MY FEELINGS. BUT PLEASE STOP USING THE FACT THAT I AM EMPEROR AS A SHIELD TO HIDE BEHIND TO FLEE FROM ME.
NOT THE "WE" THAT I AM. JUST "ME"...
RYUKI...
FLEE ...
HEH
YOU ALWAYS SAY THE MOST RIDICULOUS THINGS.
WE ARE ALWAYS SERIOUS WHEN IT COMES TO YOU.
BUT I HAVE TO KEEP FLEEING FROM YOU.
BECAUSE IF I DON'T, YOU WOULD CATCH ME FAR TOO EASILY.
NEVER FORGET THAT YOU ARE ALL WE NEED.

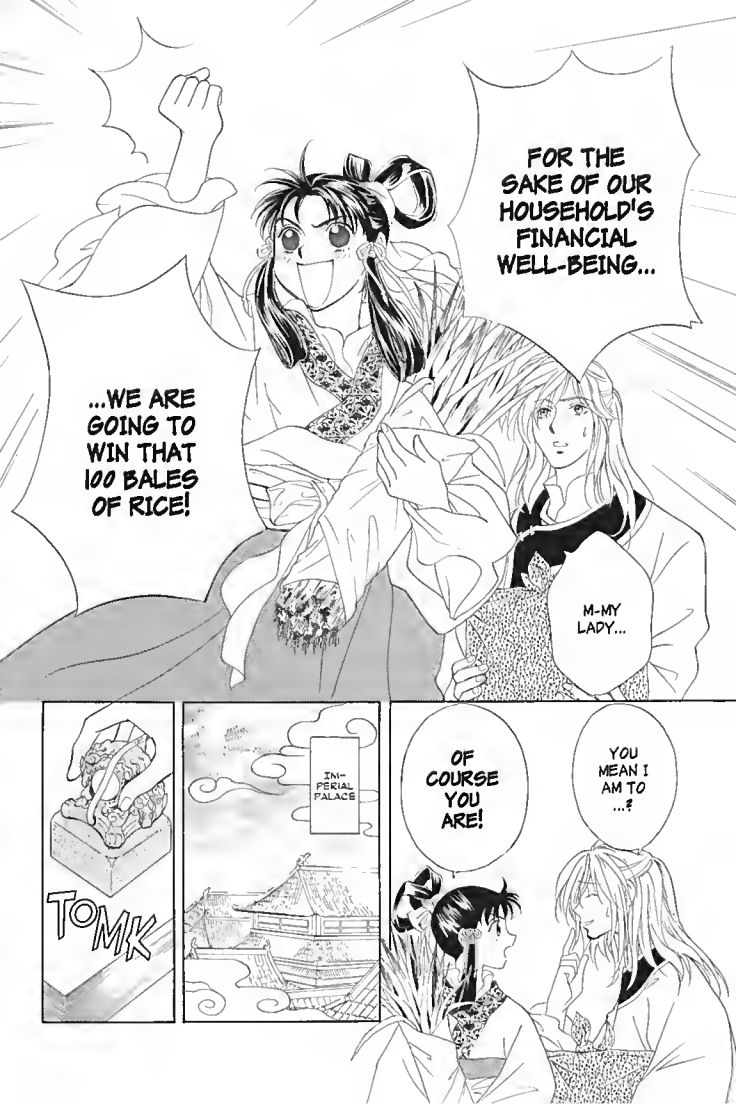
THAT HAPPINESS SHOULD BE GIVEN TO ANOTHER.
THE ONE WHO EARNS YOUR LOVE WILL BE HAPPY INDEED.
I TOOK IT SO I COULD SUPPORT YOU AS A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL.
I DIDN'T TAKE THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM TO THEN BECOME YOUR WIFE.
YOU CERTAINLY ARE STUBBORN.
BUT THAT IS FINE. WE ARE STUBBORN TOO.
BUT I DO PROMISE I WON'T WITHDRAW FROM YOU.
I WON'T LOOK AT YOU ONLY AS AN EMPEROR.
YOU REALLY ARE GOING TO BE A GOOD RULER.
AND A GOOD MAN TOO.
POFF

!!
GRIP

YOU...
That was too long! HUFF HUFF
SWIFF
NEVER FORGET...
GASP
YOU WON'T FORGET US NOW, WILL YOU?
NO MATTER WHERE YOU MAY GO...
NO MATTER WHOM YOU MAY MEET...
...THAT WE LOVE YOU.


I CAME HERE TO SUPPORT YOU.
TO STAND BY YOUR SIDE AND AID YOU UNTIL YOU CAN TRULY TAKE YOUR PLACE AS EMPEROR!
The legendary female civil servant, Shurei Hong, who would one day be sung of as having "the martial strength of the Ran and the Shi, and the scholarly wit of the Ri and the Hong"...
This was the start of her extraordinary deeds.

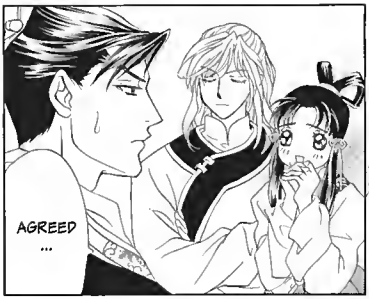

Kiyo, the capital city of Saiunkoku.
After the record-breaking heat the previous summer, the city was blessed with excellent weather...
...and an excellent harvest in the fall.
BAM!
Side Story
The Great Harvest Festival!
A HARVEST FESTIVAL TRADITION!
MEN'S CROSS-DRESSING CONTEST
WINNER WILL RECEIVE 100 BALES OF RICE!!
SEIRAN.
SHUREI HONG, A LADY OF THE HONG CLAN
SEIRAN SHI, A RETAINER OF THE HONG FAMILY
YES, MY LADY?
I'VE WAITED FOR THIS DAY.


FOR THE SAKE OF OUR HOUSEHOLD'S FINANCIAL WELL-BEING...
...WE ARE GOING TO WIN THAT 100 BALES OF RICE!
M-MY LADY...
TOMK
IM-PERIAL PALACE
OF COURSE YOU ARE!
YOU MEAN I AM TO ...?

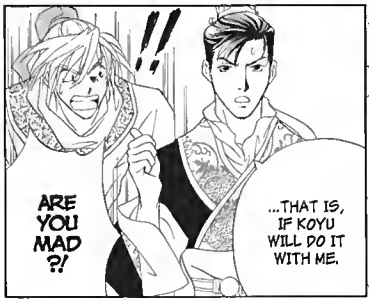
NO MATTER HOW MANY EXPENSIVE GIFTS WE SEND HER...
DON'T WASTE MONEY YOU DIDN'T EARN ON SUPPORTING ME!!
BUT OUR JOB IS BEING THE EMPEROR. HOW ELSE ARE WE SUPPOSED TO EARN MONEY?
WASN'T THAT A BIT UNFAIR OF HER?
TOMK
TOMK
SIGH
SHUREI IS SO COLD.
RYUKI SHI, EMPEROR OF SAIUN-KOKU
HEH ...
HEH HEH HEH...
HA HA HAHA
WAH HAHA
JOLT
WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THAT?
THE WINNER RECEIVES 100 BALES OF RICE...
HMM?
FLUT
A Harvest Festival Tradition
The Men's Cross-Dressing Contest
Winner will receive 100 bales of rice!

LET US GO, YURI.
YES.
KIJIN KO, MINISTER OF THE TREASURY
HMM... INDEED.
WHAT NEW FORM OF HARASS-MENT IS THIS?! THAT MISERABLE EMPEROR ...!!
UNFORTU-NATELY, YES...
ON THAT DAY OF ALL DAYS, YOU'RE ON GUARD DUTY?!
WHAT?! BY DIRECT ORDER OF HIS MAJESTY ?!
WHAT ABOUT MY 100 BALES OF RICE?!
HOW WILL I EXPLAIN THIS AFTER I BORROWED ALL THESE BEAUTIFUL JEWELS AND MAKEUP FROM WORK?!
AND AFTER I PREPARED A SPECIAL COSTUME FOR YOU!

Mnch Mnch
HEH
EVEN IF I AM UNABLE TO ENTER THE CONTEST, PERHAPS THAT 100 BALES OF RICE WILL COME FLITTING IN SOME OTHER WAY.
GLOOM
POFF
GENERAL RAN.
MY LADY...
KOYU RI, VICE MINISTER OF CIVIL AFFAIRS
HUH?
RAN SHUEI, GENERAL OF THE YULIN LEFT GUARD
BLRFF
YOU'VE HEARD THE SITUATION. WON'T YOU ENTER FOR ME IN SEIRAN'S STEAD?
UM, I DON'T NEED THOSE PRIZES ...
PRIZES FOR THIRD AND FOURTH PLACE ARE A HALF-OFF COUPON TO ANY SHOP IN THE SEVEN-COLORED WARDS...!
I WON'T ASK FOR A FULL HALF OF THE PRIZE—JUST TWENTY PERCENT WILL DO! EVEN IF YOU ONLY END UP IN SECOND PLACE, I'D STILL RECEIVE A MONTH'S WORTH OF VEGE-TABLES!
IF I ADJUST THE HEM OF THE COSTUME A BIT, I THINK IT SHOULD FIT YOU.

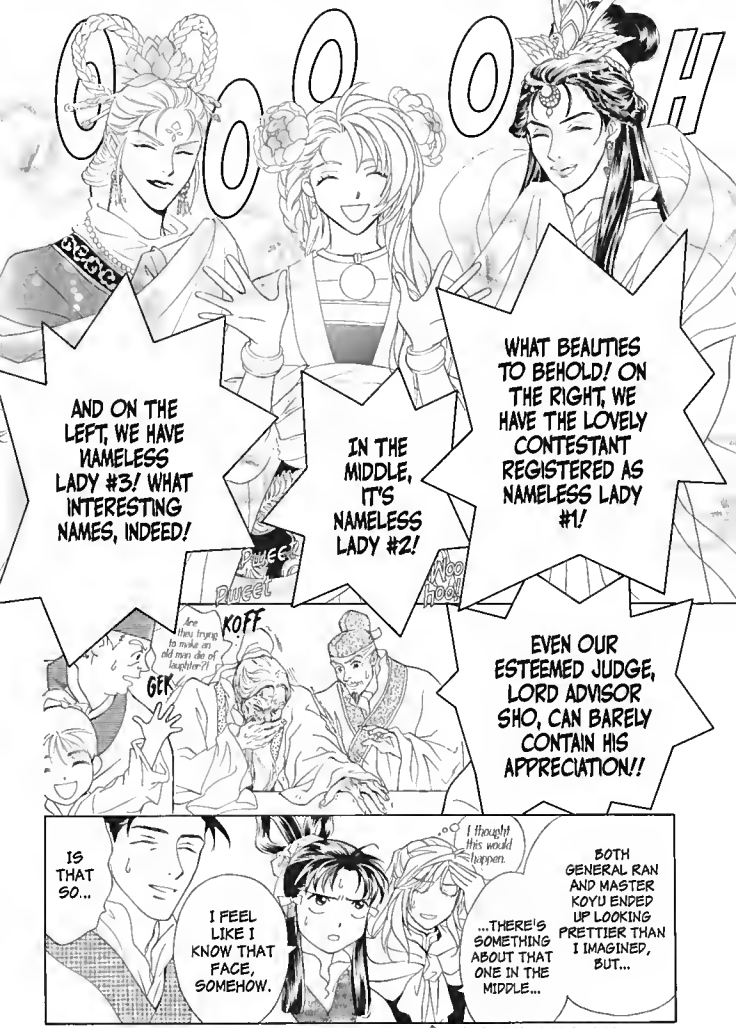

AGREED ...

I FEEL THIS IS AN EXCELLENT PLAN AS WELL.
GENERAL RAN OWES ME SEVERAL FAVORS. DO THIS AND WE WILL CALL OURSELVES EVEN.


ARE YOU MAD ?!
...THAT IS, IF KOYU WILL DO IT WITH ME.

SHUREI, YOU MUSTN'T FORCE THINGS ON PEOPLE.
SHOKA HONG, HEAD OF HOUSE-HOLD
FATHER.
IF IT'S RICE YOU WANT, I BELIEVE WE MAY STILL HAVE A LITTLE LEFT IN OUR EMERGENCY STORES.

I CAN'T BEAR FOR A MAN I RESPECT SO MUCH TO BE FORCED INTO MENIAL LABOR...!
ALL RIGHT! I'LL ENTER.
SHK
SHK
URGH ...
AND I'VE JUST FOUND MYSELF A SIDE JOB PUTTING ADDRESSES ON LETTERS!
FATHER ...!
LOOK!
WE'RE SAVED!
MASTER SHOKA.
SUCH AN INTER-ESTING FAMILY ...
LET'S WIN THAT PRIZE!!
KLANG
KLANG
KLANG
NOW, THE MOMENT YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR-THE FINAL ROUND OF THE CROSS-DRESSING CONTEST!!
DAY OF THE CON-TEST
POMF
POMF
POMP POMP
RAAH
RAAH
RAAH

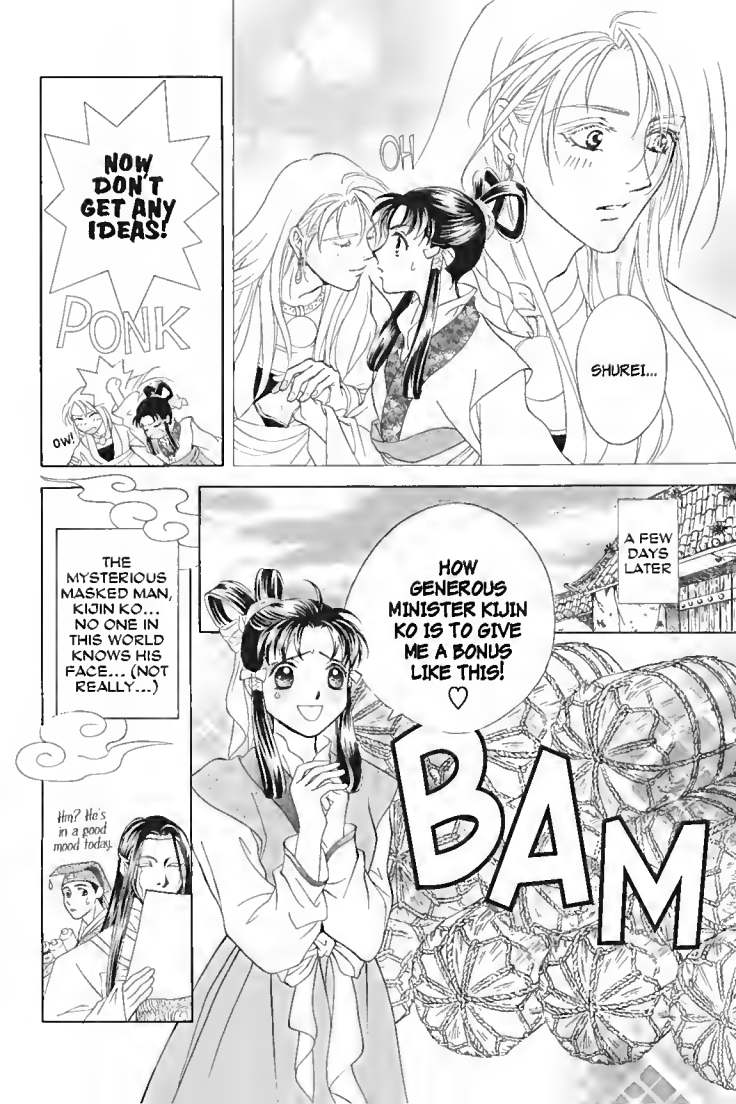

OOOOH
SQUEE
AND ON THE LEFT, WE HAVE NAMELESS LADY #3! WHAT INTERESTING NAMES, INDEED!
IN THE MIDDLE, IT'S NAMELESS LADY #2!
WHAT BEAUTIES TO BEHOLD! ON THE RIGHT, WE HAVE THE LOVELY CONTESTANT REGISTERED AS NAMELESS LADY #1!
SQUEE
SQUEE
WOO HOO!
EVEN OUR ESTEEMED JUDGE, LORD ADVISOR SHO, CAN BARELY CONTAIN HIS APPRECIATION!!
KOFF
Are they trying to make an old man die of laughter?!
GEK
IS THAT SO...
I FEEL LIKE I KNOW THAT FACE, SOMEHOW.
I thought this would happen.
...THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT ONE IN THE MIDDLE...
BOTH GENERAL RAN AND MASTER KOYU ENDED UP LOOKING PRETTIER THAN I IMAGINED, BUT...

↑ ON BREAK FROM GUARD DUTY

WHY ARE YOU HERE, YOUR MAJESTY?
WE COULD ASK YOU THE SAME!
OH
YOU AREN'T TRYING TO WIN SHUREI'S HEART TOO, ARE YOU?!
WE'RE HERE TODAY BECAUSE YOU WERE THE ONE WHO PUT SEIRAN ON GUARD DUTY!
W-WE WON'T LET YOU TAKE THE PRIZE! WE SHALL WIN BY VIRTUE OF OUR YOUTH!
FOOL! IN WHAT WORLD DOES AN EMPEROR GET HIMSELF SO WORKED UP OVER A CROSS-DRESSING CONTEST?!
AAH! WAIT JUST A MOMENT!
IT SEEMS WE HAVE A LAST-MINUTE ENTRY!!
LET US BRING OUR NEW CONTESTANT ON STAGE! PLEASE WELCOME...
SUFF

AH!
SILENCE
THAT PERSON...
SO BEAUTIFUL...
Wooooo

IN THE FACE OF SUCH BEAUTY...
GRR
HE'S NOT FAKING A SINGLE SMILE.
Mm mm...
HE'S NOT EVEN WEARING MAKEUP.
...EVEN WE LOSE.
SLUMP
WE FINISHED FOURTH! AND WE LOST BY LOTTERY, OF ALL THINGS!
EVEN AN EMPEROR WOULD CRY AFTER LOSING LIKE THAT!
OH, COME NOW. AN EMPEROR SHOULDN'T CRY OVER SUCH A THING.
OF COURSE!
IT'S THE VERY FIRST THING YOU'VE EARNED THROUGH YOUR OWN EFFORT!
YOU WILL ACCEPT IT?
HEE
AND ARE YOU GIVING YOUR HALF-OFF COUPON CONSOLATION PRIZE TO ME?


NOW DON'T GET ANY IDEAS!
PONK
OW!
OH
SHUREI...
A FEW DAYS LATER
HOW GENEROUS MINISTER KIJIN KO IS TO GIVE ME A BONUS LIKE THIS! ♡
BAM
THE MYSTERIOUS MASKED MAN, KIJIN KO... NO ONE IN THIS WORLD KNOWS HIS FACE... (NOT REALLY...)
Hm? He's in a good mood today.

Kairi Yura was born on January 16. She is the illustrator of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She is also the creator of the *Angelique* series. Yura's hobby is going to the theater.

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THE STORY OF SAIUNKOKU
Volume 8

Shojo Beat Edition

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Saiunkoku Monogatari Volume 8
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First published in Japan in 2011 by KADOKAWA SHOTEN Co., Ltd., Tokyo.
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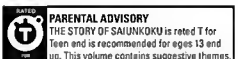
Printed in Canada

Published by VIZ Media, LLC
P.O. Box 77010
San Francisco, CA 94107

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First printing, October 2012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